

Maximizing Concept Application with Hands-on Team Projects in a Concentrated Public Relations Course

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A unique pedagogical challenge is presented in the form of a concentrated 400-level introductory public relations course that meets for a total of 15 lessons of 2.5 hours each. The instructor details the benefits of active learning in the classroom, as well as how the use of team projects helps bring real-world examples and hands-on experience of public relations research, planning, communication and evaluation into a classroom of upperclassmen and -women who, through this course, are gaining an introduction to a field they may consider for graduate study, internships or future employment. Rationale for the use of such projects are discussed, including benefits of active learning, appealing to the millennial generation, “real-world” application beyond a textbook, enhancing students’ autonomy in the classroom, and the importance of working in a team. Each project is outlined in terms of its methodology, aspects of student autonomy, objective and analysis. Conclusions and implications are discussed.

Keywords: Public relations, active learning, pedagogy, projects, millennials, technology, student autonomy, teamwork, application.

Concentrated Public Relations Course

The experience of teaching abroad offers many advantages to the educator, including first-hand experience in the differing nature of educational institutions themselves. The following case study occurred over the course of four years teaching overseas in Singapore. While

larger lecture-style classes in the United States or Singapore can easily number in the hundreds, an experience that could render a Western instructor feeling a sense of culture shock involves discussion-style, writing-intensive classes that are filled to a capacity of 50-55 students. When given the opportunity to teach summer sections of a public relations (PR) course, the following unique pedagogical challenge was encountered: How to provide hands-on experience to a large group of students in a 400-level introductory professional course within a concentrated timeline. This paper details the nature of the course, the use of teams, and then focuses on the benefits of team projects. Each project is analyzed in terms of its method, level of student autonomy and objectives. Discussion of outcomes and implications for instructors of similarly structured courses follow. While the case study detailed in this article concerns the comparatively unique experience of teaching an accelerated, large discussion-style course in Southeast Asia, the projects presented for consideration are ones that could easily be adapted for use in any size class in any location.

NATURE OF THE COURSE, TEAMS AND ASSESSMENTS AND ACTIVE LEARNING NATURE OF THE COURSE

The two sections are filled to capacity with 50 students in each section, are conducted in a discussion style and meet three times a week for two-and-a-half hour meetings. The summer session covers the same amount of material as would be contained in a standard 15-week course, but the summer version convenes for a total of fifteen meetings. To complicate matters further, the course is designed to be an introductory PR course taught at the 400-level. The global edition of Wilcox, Cameron and Reber's *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics* text, currently in its 11th edition, was selected by the instructor for this course (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015).

NATURE OF TEAMS WITH RESPECT TO TEACHING IN A SOUTHEAST ASIAN UNIVERSITY

A technique employed by the instructor for adapting discussion and writing-style courses to the large class sizes prevalent in Singapore

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is dividing students into five-to-six-person teams. While a business communication discussion-style course with a focus on writing, for example, might seem overwhelming with an enrollment of 55 students, it is far more manageable and enjoyable for all involved when it is compartmentalized as a course with an enrollment of 11 teams of five students each. This arrangement is beneficial not only in the assignment of teamwork, but also in the leading of class discussions, assessment of attendance and contribution, and creating an overall sense of bonding in a class size that might render a quieter student lost in the crowd.

WHY USE HANDS-ON PROJECTS?

Hands-on projects were found to be particularly beneficial in this accelerated 400-level professional course for the following five reasons:

- 1) Benefits of active learning, 2) Appealing to the millennial generation, 3) “Real-world” application beyond a textbook, 4) Placing students in the “driver’s seat” and 5) The importance of working in a team.

BENEFITS OF ACTIVE LEARNING

In their 1991 monograph, Bonwell and Eison explore the then-relatively new concept of *active learning*. The authors define the concept as entailing five characteristics:

- 1) students are involved in more than just listening, 2) less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing students’ skills, 3) students are involved in higher-order thinking, 4) students are engaged in activities and 5) greater emphasis is placed on students’ exploration of their own attitudes and values (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p. 19).

Lubbers and Gorcyca expand on these characteristics in their article exploring the likelihood of instructors using active learning strategies in public relations classes. Lubbers and Gorcyca conclude that such strategies are likely to be superior to passive teaching methods (Lubbers & Gorcyca, 1997). Additional support for these claims is found in Wang’s 2016 peer review of a faculty course portfolio, in which Wang details a two-week crisis management simulation exercise in a 400-level public relations theory and strategy class in which students managed a three-stage fictional crisis of bedbugs on campus. The use of the simulation activity improved student learning outcomes and received positive qualitative feedback as well, with students indicating that the project provided them with a believable real-life scenario in which to put theory into practice (Wang, 2016). In addition to these benefits of active learning, such projects also provide stimulation that passive learning strategies may not.

While there seem to be no tried-and-true research methods to determine the precise attention span of the university student (Wilson & Korn, 2007), the grueling two-and-a-half hour long lesson periods of

this concentrated summer course lend best to varied teaching methods. Bunce, Flens and Neiles (2010) suggest that as students cannot pay continuous attention for an entire class lecture (which they denoted as 50 minutes), instructors should include activities that are student-focused. In their study, they used personal response devices, colloquially called *clickers*. Other research not only supports interactive lectures as a preferred and successful classroom format, (where the traditional lecture format is punctuated with breaks where students engage in activities or discussion) but also that this style is successful in universities outside of the United States and across disciplines (Miller, McNear & Metz, 2013; Myllymaki, 2012; Rehman, Afzal & Kamran, 2013).

In order to keep and maintain student attention during these lengthier meetings, the instructor designed a typical class day to start with announcements and/or a 15-minute student-corrected quiz to test retention of material, then progress to a 20-30-minute “key points” lecture that includes at least one video clip for analysis and discussion, a 30-minute case study presentation and discussion which is led entirely by a student team, and then either another 20-30-minute lecture followed by a class discussion, or a team project. A ten-minute break, the timing of which is announced at the beginning of the class, comes partway through the period, which drastically reduces the number of times students leave the classroom for personal needs during the aforementioned activities.

In this way, the class period is divided; students are not only listening to a lecture, but they are also periodically standing up and moving, listening to speakers other than their lecturer and interacting with one another. In this way, team projects are an integral part of the curriculum. One day out of each of the three meetings per week involves working with their teams on a hands-on application of the material they are learning.

APPEALING TO MILLENNIALS

The university students encountered in this case study – and those with which current instructors are familiar – are of the Millennial Generation. Millennials are loosely defined as those born between 1982 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000), with the most recently born millennials being considered *digital natives*, or those born into a world where the World Wide Web and hand-held electronics have always existed. These Millennials are characterized by operating at “twitch speed” (Prensky, 1998, p. 14) and having a preference for multitasking, a desire to be networked with one another and a strong predilection toward digital technology (Prensky 2001; Schrum & Levin, 2015). Indeed, all students in this university come to class equipped with laptops, tablets, electronic notebooks or at the very least, an internet-enabled smart phone¹.

With these characteristics in mind, hands-on projects, during which students are able to interact with one another while using digital media

in conjunction with traditional classroom assessments, seem to be an optimal way to reach the Millennial student.

“REAL WORLD” APPLICATION BEYOND A TEXTBOOK

In a perfect world, a 400-level PR course would involve real-world training through such activities as a volunteer program, job shadowing or a class project with a community client. However, the length of the course (five weeks) combined with the number of students in each class (50) topped with the fact that the course serves as an introductory overview to the field make this concept unrealistic. Students have had no previous experience with PR; this course is their foundational introduction. Therefore, the instructor was tasked with trying to find a way to give students a real-world application of the material beyond the textbook, yet also within a structured environment for students starting out with no field-related knowledge. Two guest speakers who currently work in PR (one residing locally in Southeast Asia and one residing in the United States who speaks to the class via Skype) are invited to give guest lectures which are combined with lengthy student-driven question-answer sessions. However, an element of applied student learning would still be preferred. Group projects that require students to explore real cases, real PR firms and real companies outside of the textbook give them this opportunity.

PLACING STUDENTS IN THE DRIVER’S SEAT

A balance of structure and autonomy within the classroom provides an optimal learning environment in which students are likely to feel more invested in the course (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio & Turner, 2004). Therefore, the course was designed to give students free rein to choose topics, cases and the direction of their assignments as frequently as possible. These projects are structured around a set of questions to guide discussion and the formation of their final output – a 2-to-3-page brief that teams turn in following the activity – but aside from that, students are given many opportunities to drive their projects on their own volition.

In each outline of the projects given below, a section entitled “Driver’s Seat” – a title which alludes to students’ ability to steer their own course of action within a class rather than be merely “passengers” in a class driven entirely by an instructor – will further detail specific ways in which autonomy is given to the student teams.

¹ While it never occurred during this case study, it should be noted that to avoid economically-based discrimination, the instructor should be prepared to accommodate any student who does not have such a device. During team projects, sharing of devices is allowed and encouraged, and online surveys or forms used during the class (e.g. SurveyMonkey, Google Forms) allow multiple submissions from the same IP address, which enables a student to pass a single device to multiple students so that they can complete the task.

IMPORTANCE OF WORKING IN A TEAM

Robles (2012) asked 57 business executives to name soft skills that they felt were important attributes in today's work place. *Teamwork* made the top ten list. When asked to rank the importance of those skills on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important), 40 of the 57 individuals ranked *teamwork* as either very or extremely important. One could also argue that the other nine soft skills listed in this study (integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, professionalism, positive attitude, flexibility and work ethic), are also skills that are built through regular teamwork (Robles, 2012, p. 455-456).

While the instructor constructed a grading schema in such a way that individual assessment constitutes more than half of the students' final grades, a large percentage is determined by the quality of work produced as a team. Students were encouraged to "work it out" if they encounter conflict. Learning how to disagree professionally, navigate conflict effectively, firmly state ideas and work collaboratively are skills that cannot be taught through book-learning, spoon-feeding or hand-holding. Thus, the group projects given in this course also benefit students as a way to build soft skills that will be crucial to them in the workplace.

MAXIMIZING CONCEPT APPLICATION THROUGH HANDS-ON PROJECTS

The projects were designed to correspond to one chapter from each of the five units that Wilcox, Cameron and Reber denote in their text (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015). While each project corresponds to a chapter and unit, they are not mutually exclusive entities. The questions and team discussions are designed to cumulatively build on the knowledge that students are gaining throughout the semester (see the project handout sheet content in Appendix A).

The next section will detail the synopsis, method, student autonomy ("driver's seat") and analysis of each of the five projects.

PROJECT 1: "PR ETHICS AROUND THE WORLD"

Synopsis. Students are randomly assigned PR codes of ethics from two foreign countries and must analyze, compare and contrast the codes.

Method. Codes of ethics were collected from PR associations around the world through extensive online research. Ethics statements that were not available in English were translated using Google Translate software. Students were notified that they might receive a computer-translated file, and thus they should not consider language errors in their analysis. There were 23 codes in all, from Argentina, Australia,

Austria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Israel, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and Turkey, as well as the international Codes of Athens, Lisbon and Venice. Codes from the United States and Singapore were excluded due to potential for existing familiarity or prejudice.

On the day of the project, the codes are numbered and distributed by asking each team to choose two numbers between 1 and 23, eliminating numbers as they are chosen. In this way, teams were blindly assigned two codes. The codes are housed on a class portal website and are accessible as downloadable PDF files.

First, as individuals, students are to read each code and list three ways in which they are similar and three ways in which they are different. As a group, teams then discuss the codes with the objective of composing a 2-3 page brief considering each document's strengths, weaknesses, overarching similarities and particular differences, as well as reasons these similarities and differences might exist. Teams are reminded that their goal is to analyze each document objectively, not to choose the "best" or "winning" code.

Driver's seat. Aside from being given the codes they are to analyze, the direction of the assignment is up to the students. The questions on the handout provide directions that their analyses can take, but the students determine their own research of each country. Papers have revealed investigations of such themes as countries' histories, cultural dimensions, political environments, levels of journalistic freedom and economic health and how these factors might influence the practice of public relations. Impressive analyses are born from this project.

Analysis. The idea for this assignment for analyzing international PR associations' codes of conduct was inspired in part by Suggested Projects and Discussion #3 from Chapter 3 of the Pearson-issued instructor's manual for the Wilcox, Cameron and Reber text to analyze codes of conduct within organizations (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015): *Have students search various websites for organizational codes of conduct. Lead a discussion on the common elements included in the codes that they reviewed and how those elements guide the company/organization in their ethical success* (Pettigrew & Lingwall, 2015, p. 20).

The main objective of this assignment is to cement a respect of the importance of ethics in the field of public relations, as well as to develop an understanding of the cultural variables that might influence the different interpretations of what is considered ethical behavior in one country versus another.

This is a fun project with which to kick off the first week. Students are not yet entirely familiar with one another, so being given something concrete to analyze and discuss seems to provide them with common ground, which is, in actuality, a secondary objective of the assignment. An impressive level of curiosity combined with fascination at the differences between the codes they are given often leads students

to take the initiative to read additional codes besides the ones they are assigned. A combination of student expertise (e.g. some with interests in history, others with interests in politics) creates a seemingly positive experience with team synergy while simultaneously providing the opportunity to explore a dual theme that is pervasive in the field of public relations: How to define ethical behavior, and how to enforce it.

PROJECT 2: “IABC GOLD QUILL WINNERS: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?”

Synopsis. Students read a Gold Quill Winner case as chosen by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), consider how they would prepare for the situation, and compare and contrast their plan against the real-life winner’s plan.

Method. A hyperlink to the IABC’s website featuring their current and past Gold Quill Winners case submissions (“Gold Quill Awards: Winners,” 2015) is posted to the class website. Students are given time to read through several cases, and then decide as a team which case they will analyze.

Individually within their teams, students first read the “Need/Opportunity” section of the submission. Stopping at that point, they record notes about their impressions of the situation and what they would do. Then, working as a team, they consider their intended audiences, goals and objectives, a rough idea of a plan, how the results will be measured, and what challenges will be present in enacting the plan. This assignment is designed to correspond with materials covered in previous chapters concerning research, program planning, communication and evaluation. Finally, students read the “rest of the story” in the remainder of the case submission. Upon learning what the PR professionals did in this scenario, they can compare and contrast the similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses of their plan to the real plan in a 2-3 page brief.

Driver’s seat. Students are able to choose whichever case study they wish to analyze as well as work together to devise a plan they feel would speak to the needs and opportunities presented in the first part of the case. Additionally, they are encouraged to develop their own parameters for the assignment – some choose to keep the “setting” of the case in the city of origin, and some students choose to address the need/opportunity as if the case study were hypothetically set in their home city or country.

Analysis. The idea for this project was inspired in part by a statement in Chapter 6 of the Pearson-issued instructor’s manual for the Wilcox, Cameron and Reber text (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015) suggesting instructors to contact the PRSA or IABC to request materials related to successful past campaigns (Pettigrew & Lingwall, 2015, p. 35). Based on past personal experience with award submissions to such professional organizations while working in public relations, the instructor decided to have students look up particular case studies that

interested them from the IABC Gold Quill Award website. IABC was chosen to suit an international group of students. The IABC initiated the Gold Quill Awards in 1971 with the aim of recognizing exemplary strategic communication programs around the world (“Gold Quill Awards: About,” 2016). Benefits of introducing students to this organization are twofold: 1) Students become aware of a globally-recognized professional organization and 2) Students may later avail themselves of the information found on the IABC website and network. The objective of this project is to show students, through a flexible assignment and team autonomy, that PR planning is “harder than it looks” when one is coming up with a fresh idea from scratch, as opposed to reading about what has been done in retrospect.

Final assignments for this project have shown great ingenuity and outside-of-the-box thinking. Students have created ideas for social media campaigns complete with hashtags; some have created innovative events; others have come up with proposed partnerships with local media and celebrities. While directions for how much outside research they must do are intentionally kept unencumbered by source types or numbers of resources, students show excellent self-directed learning in researching relevant statistics, costs and similar event success rates. Additionally, as students read the real-life plan, they can see glaring concepts they missed (e.g. we didn’t think about how much our idea would cost... we used social media but didn’t realize how effective traditional media could be...). This project effectively gets students to learn from PR professionals’ accounts as well as to begin to think like a PR professional despite their limited experience with the field material.

PROJECT 3: “THE PERSUADERS ANALYSIS”

Synopsis. Students watch a 25-minute clip of the PBS documentary *The Persuaders*. Four critical thinking questions guide a group discussion. The group chooses two critical thinking questions from which to build a theme for a 2-page brief.

Method. With time constraints in mind, a clip of the PBS documentary series *The Persuaders* was chosen for screening which focuses on audience oversaturation of advertising messages as well as the integrated marketing communication campaign surrounding the launch of Song Airlines, a Delta subsidiary, in 2003 (Goodman, Goodman, Soenens & Rushkoff, 2004).

While watching the video, team members are asked to consider the answers to four critical thinking questions. After taking a short time to compose their thoughts on the questions after the video, teams engage in a group discussion of their impressions. Using their discussion points from two questions as a theme, teams compose a 2-page brief.

It is entertaining to note that this project handout is universally met with outright dismay as the request went out for papers to be shortened from a length of two to three double-spaced pages down to two. Learning how to write concisely is a valuable skill for students to learn, and this new guideline provides an opportunity to practice this particular ability.

Driver's seat. While the topic and critical thinking questions are provided, the nature of this paper is perhaps one of the most autonomous out of the five projects. For some students, the lack of content requirement seems daunting; for others, a welcome idea. When pressed for more details, students are instructed that an overall theme of their choosing from their discussion of two of the questions must drive their paper.

Analysis. The idea for having students watch this particular documentary comes from Suggested Projects and Discussion #2 in Chapter 9 of the Pearson-issued instructor's manual for the Wilcox, Cameron and Reber text (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015), stating: *Another good video to show students to demonstrate the role of persuasion in the communications industry is the PBS video, "The Persuaders". The video is available online in segments* (Pettigrew & Lingwall, 2015, p. 46). Two of the critical thinking questions were adapted from PBS's online forum for the show ("Forum: So how should we think about all of this?" 2004).

The objective of this assignment is to crystalize the understanding of the synergy that can exist among cooperative advertising, PR and marketing departments and firms. Additionally, students gain an understanding of the saturated market they will someday be vying for as mass communication efforts become ever more creative in their endeavor to be heard above the din.

This course consistently touches on the theme of integrated communication: that combining public relations, marketing and advertising into one holistic concept is a valuable mindset. *The Persuaders* and the ensuing discussion questions enable students to see how one field can help the other to influence public opinion, as the story of the ill-fated budget-friendly Song Airlines provides a cautionary tale of what happens when an abstract brand concept is created before a business. Students are asked how PR could have helped save Song Airlines, and their papers show that they are starting to think along the lines of the R.A.C.E. (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) acronym they encounter early in the semester – papers entail discussion of better research, planning, communicating, as well as the evaluation of measurable objectives.

PROJECT 4: "ONLINE PRESS ROOM EXPLORATION"

Synopsis. Students review the first 100 businesses listed in *Global Fortune 500*, then select two businesses and explore their online media centers.

Method. A link is placed to the annual list of the *Global Fortune 500* (e.g. Global 500 2015) on the course website. This list was chosen rather than *Forbes* because of the international nature of this particular body of students. In interest of time, students are limited to the first 100 businesses, and must decide as a team which two they will analyze. Students then find the companies' websites and search for the online

news rooms/media centers. Individual impressions of the page are recorded, which leads to a discussion guided by a loose set of parameters. Students compare and contrast the qualities of the newsrooms they have explored in a two-page brief.

Driver's seat. Teams have complete freedom to choose from a list of one hundred top global companies. Additionally, the exploration of these companies and their news rooms is driven entirely by them. With the instructions to "think like a journalist," they are encouraged to determine whether they will focus on an international or local web page, what criteria they will use to assess the media rooms (aside from the guiding questions on their worksheet) and ultimately, the direction that their analysis brief will take.

Analysis. This project is inspired in part by the Suggested Projects and Discussion #2 in Chapter 13 of the Pearson-distributed instructor's manual for the Wilcox, Cameron and Reber text (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015): *Ask students to visit the pressrooms of several different websites. Discuss the organization of most online pressrooms and the type of material that is made available through an online pressroom* (Pettigrew & Lingwall, 2015, p. 62).

The objective of this assignment is to encourage students to take the point of view of the journalists for whom the media center should be designed. This in turn will hopefully help them see the value of different page attributes and the disadvantages of others from the perspective of the PR agent who may advise on the design of such a site and serve as a liaison to the media.

Students seem to enjoy choosing companies to analyze and the process of making this choice can be fraught with high-energy decision-making tactics. Some choose companies within the same industry (e.g. Apple and Samsung) while others choose wildly different industries (e.g. Nestlé and Royal Dutch Shell). In addition to elements proposed by the worksheet, students also commented on such topics as the user-friendliness of the sites, the manner in which past news releases are organized, the presence of a search engine and the availability of multimedia and social media connections. By having to search for and navigate these newsrooms themselves, this project places students in the role of both the journalist and PR agent.

PROJECT 5: "CORPORATE PR NIGHTMARES"

Synopsis. Teams are randomly assigned one case from the annual top-ten lists of PR crises as analyzed in *The Holmes Report* (Holmes, 2015; Sudhaman, 2015). Students must investigate the story, compose an outline for a strategic conflict management plan, then compare and contrast their strategies with what actually happened in a two-page brief.

Method. *The Holmes Report* is reviewed for the analyses of the top ten PR crises of the year. Cases are selected which are most likely to spark the highest level of interest among students and occasionally

cases are eliminated which may be emotional triggers (e.g. this year, Malaysia Airlines was highlighted, and as these students live in the region from which MH370 disappeared, choosing this case for a class project would have been in poor taste). Therefore, chosen cases span a few years of *The Holmes Report* articles.

Each case is pasted into a Word document that is hyperlinked back to the original article. This way, each case can be divided into three sections: Introduction, Analysis and Lessons Learned. Much like in Project #2 where students first read the Need/Opportunities, for this project, students first read the introductory paragraph for each case. They individually brainstorm a list of research questions they would ask corporation leaders if they were handling the crisis. Then, as a team, they investigate the case and outline a strategic conflict management plan. Finally, they read the rest of *The Holmes Report* article as well as other sources and analyze their strategy in the context of what actually happened.

Driver's seat. Aside from being assigned a case to work on, students direct their own investigation and creation of their plan. They alone determine how deeply they investigate the story and what sources they use.

Analysis. The objective of this project is to bring what students have learned over the past five weeks to culmination. While crisis planning is certainly only a part of the broad spectrum of PR activities, it is an arena which brings all manner of skillsets to the fore. Students must consider what critical information they need, assess who their target audiences are and what key messages must be communicated, what actions the company must take and how they can evaluate whether they have been successful. Additionally, this project pushes students to think through the crisis management life cycle encountered previously in their text (Wilcox, Cameron & Reber, 2015; pp. 285-287).

This is an engaging project with which to end the semester. At this point, students have gotten to know one another quite well, so they tackle their assigned crises with the high spirits of a relatively bonded group. Despite the fact that no stringent requirements are placed on the amount of background research that students must accomplish, they typically take it upon themselves to dig up as much information as they can through websites, news articles, social media and collateral materials like news releases. One student neatly summed up the draw to this kind of communication scenario while investigating a particularly involved case with the statement, "This is better than a Korean drama!" This project ups the ante by showing the real-life stress – and resolutions – that can be found in PR in a relatable and hopefully empathetic manner.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

After teaching a total of six sections of this uniquely positioned course over the span of three summers, it could be argued that the

hands-on projects are the glue that hold the other class elements together. The team case study presentation and discussion gives students public speaking and discussion facilitation experience. The individual quizzes test comprehension and retention of material; speaker questions prepare students to engage with guest lecturers and the individual “crisis watch” journals encourage them to track a real-world PR issue of their choosing. The completion of a media kit or an interview paper individually or with a partner promotes critical thinking and application of core concepts. And of course, the individually-earned merit and punctuality points encourage professional comportment.

But in conjunction with the other class elements, the ongoing series of team projects promotes the crystallization of textbook knowledge with the added advantage of a hands-on approach to real-world scenarios. Given the time limitations coupled with the introductory nature of the course, the projects provide students with a realistic outlet for the application of textbook knowledge at an advanced level suitable for their age group and academic standing.

As the need to maintain equality in the presentation of both course sections over the summer sessions was vital, it was not possible to create a control group (a class section without active learning assignments) which might have provided comparative quantitative data through which to analyze whether statistically significant benefits of such active learning projects in the classroom exist. However, student feedback on course evaluations suggested that the projects were successful in achieving their objectives of fostering an active learning environment, appealing to the millennial generation and providing students with autonomy, teamwork experience and real-world applications of the concepts. The following statements are taken verbatim from the instructor’s summer 2015 course evaluations:

- I feel that the group projects were particularly useful because they helped me to understand and apply the concepts learned in class better.
- We learnt to apply real world skills of PR rather than sit back and read the textbook. We learnt really practical things, rather than the regurgitation of academic material.
- The assignments were very hands on. Allowed us to find insight on PR related matters and work on PR projects. And they were very fun to work on as well.
- Many of the assignments were application based and that really helped me to understand how to apply these theories to real life situations.

This qualitative feedback from students, in response to the evaluation prompt “Please comment on the elements of the course you found particularly effective” provide support for the claim that such assignments are positively received by students.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The assignment analyses and appendix explain that these activities were born of inspiration from sometimes single-line suggestions in the instructor's manual. Intensive research and planning were necessary to form the finished assignment concept from that seed of inspiration. Advance preparation, the creation of a plan and willingness to deviate from that plan when necessary, and striking a balance between clear guidelines and student autonomy were critical components of this endeavor and helped make this particular course element successful for three consecutive years. Future studies might include a pre- and post-test of concept mastery in order to further assess the efficacy of active-learning projects such as those described here.

As discussed, this class structure is a decidedly unique one, but this conceptualization of the team activities and their rationale could be useful to instructors of varied classes regardless of size or type. While team projects are certainly not a novel idea, the explication of these particular activities might serve other instructors of similar courses as an indication of ways in which an introductory course can be given a real-world edge. They might also be useful for advanced-level courses which are limited by a shortened or concentrated semester or some other time constraint which would render real-world collaboration unrealistic. This may also serve as a useful case reference for those who are teaching unusually large discussion or writing courses of any discipline.

APPENDIX A

PROJECTS DEVELOPED FOR A CONCENTRATED PUBLIC RELATIONS COURSE¹

Each of these handouts are posted on the class portal website in a folder designated for each project with any necessary accompanying materials. Additionally, one copy is printed for each team. The back of the handout will typically include an outline table to help students organize their team discussion. Each project handout also concludes with the following list of requirements (the page limit varies by assignment):

When you turn in your final project, please be sure to have the following things:

- A typed 2-3 page paper written by your group. A cover page is NOT necessary, but your names should be at the top. Please include your 8-digit person numbers, class section and team number.
- Each group member's individual notes – these can be hand-written. Just staple them to the back of your assignment.
- This drafting page or any notes you made as a group as you discussed and wrote the paper.

PROJECT #1 PR ETHICS AROUND THE WORLD

Your group has randomly selected Code of Ethics statements from two PR associations of the world. You will be working first as individuals and then as a group to compare and contrast these statements.

First, as individuals, read the statements and come up with a list of three ways they are similar and three ways in which they are different. Save these notes to include with your final submission.

Your task as a group is to thoroughly read and discuss these statements together. Then, compose a 2-3 page paper (double spaced, standard margins, 12-point font) discussing the similarities and differences. Please dedicate equal space to the similarities as you do the differences.

Remember, the goal is not to decide which country's statement is "the best" or "wins" over the other. Rather, you should objectively consider each document's strengths, weaknesses, overarching similarities and particular differences. Consider why these similarities and differences might exist. Is there anything that both statements lack?

Please understand that some of these statements have been translated from their native language into English using translating software.

¹ Those wishing to use these handouts and project ideas are welcomed to do so. Please credit the author of this manuscript as well as the authors of the textbook referenced within the article.

Don't be too harsh on grammar! If wording in any particular area is too difficult to understand, please disregard it.

Feel free to use the chart on the back of this page as a drafting page to jot down your initial discussion as a group.

PROJECT #2 IABC GOLD QUILL WINNERS: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Your group has chosen an IABC Gold Quill Award Winner case study. You will be working first as individuals and then as a group to determine how YOU would address the issue at hand.

First, as individuals, read the first section of the case study ("Need/Opportunity"). Please do not read any further at this time. Considering the situation described in the case study, record a few notes about how YOU would handle the situation. Save these notes to include with your final submission.

Your first task as a group is to thoroughly read and discuss this first section ("Need/Opportunity") of the case study together. Using the notes you took as individuals, discuss how YOU would handle the situation, if your group were the PR firm called in to construct a solution or solve a given situation. Use the table on the back of this sheet to take detailed notes as you discuss this case together. You should consider the following:

- Who are the intended audiences that should be addressed?
- What are the main goals or objectives of this campaign?
- What solution would you come up with that would meet the goals/objectives?
- How would you measure your results (how would you know if your plan was successful or not)?
- What challenges do you think you might encounter?

Your second task as a group is to read and discuss the rest of the case study together. Compare and contrast your plan with the one detailed in the case study.

Compose a 2-3 page paper (double spaced, standard margins, 12-point font) discussing the similarities and differences between your plan and the firm's plan. Please dedicate equal space to the similarities as you do the differences. Objectively consider each plan's strengths, weaknesses, overarching similarities and particular differences. Consider why these similarities and differences might exist. Is there anything that both plans fail to take into account?

PROJECT #3 ANALYSIS OF THE PERSUADERS

As a class, we will be watching a portion of a PBS documentary

entitled *The Persuaders*. You will be working first as individuals and then as a group to analyze the controversial themes addressed in this program.

First, take notes as you watch the show on anything that stands out. In particular, please consider the following questions:

1. Playwright Arthur Miller said in an interview that “our culture now is advertising.” How would you define the changing character of the society you live in? And, if you agree with Miller, then what impact is this having on us?
2. Since many messages are increasingly trying to move us to act and make choices on an emotional level, how can we move about in this world with a degree of self-awareness as to what’s happening?
3. Where are we headed? What are your thoughts on how far the techniques of persuasion might go?
4. Song Airlines, the new airline depicted in this program, actually folded after only 3 years of service. John Moore of the blog “Brand Autopsy” writes, “You cannot create a brand before you create a business. The business creates a brand.” Do you feel that effective, persuasive public relations efforts could have enabled Song to survive? If so, how? How could PR and advertising/branding have worked together?

Your task as a group is to discuss these questions and one another’s answers to these questions together. Do you agree on any one point as a group? Where do you disagree? You may use the back of this page for notes. Incorporate your answers to these questions into a well-constructed 2 page paper (TWO PAGES!). You should still have an introduction and conclusion.

PROJECT #4 ANALYSIS OF ONLINE NEWS ROOMS

Your group has just selected the names of two top-100 Fortune 500 companies. Your objective will be to find the companies’ official websites and analyze the online news rooms. Bear in mind this PRWeek quote: “*An online pressroom is the media’s front door to the company.*”

Your first task as an individual is to jot down your initial impressions about the newsroom. This is the time to record your “gut reaction” to the online newsroom. Crowded? Clean? Overstimulating? Lackluster? Empty? Fun? Creative? Boring?

Your task as a group is to compare and contrast these two newsrooms. According to our text, a good online newsroom should have AT LEAST the following:

1. Current and archived news releases
2. The names, phone numbers and direct email addresses of

- public relations contacts
- 3. Photographs
- 4. Product information
- 5. An opportunity for journalists to sign up for a daily RSS feed if they regularly cover that particular company or industry

How well do your two companies' news rooms measure up? Do they have the five items above? What are they missing? What extra features do they have? How easy were the newsrooms to access? Were they easy to navigate? How are they similar and different? How might the nature of the specific companies or industries whose newsrooms you're analyzing affect the feeling or content of their newsrooms? You may use the table on the back of this page as a starting point to compile your group notes. However, don't feel limited to what's in the table. Feel free to add additional details.

Compose a 2 page paper (double spaced, standard margins, 12-point font) covering your analysis. Be sure to dedicate equal space to each newsroom.

PROJECT #5 PR NIGHTMARES

Your group has just randomly been given one PR nightmare "ripped from the headlines," as they say. These cases are taken directly from The Holmes Report, a great resource to read news, developments and updates about the field of public relations. Imagine that this crisis is well underway, and you are the lucky PR firm that the corporation has called in. So you're new to the situation – and you've got to start from scratch.

Read the first paragraph, above the bold line. Your task as an individual is to brainstorm a list of questions that you would ask the corporation leaders. Consider what information you need before you can formulate a plan. Don't read any further.

Next, as a group, do some digging. Investigate what really happened in this case. Once you have more details on the situation, brainstorm how you would suggest the corporation handle the situation. Compose an outline for a strategic conflict management plan. Consider what you have learned about corporations (Ch 17) and crisis management (Ch 10). You're basically jumping in at the Strategic Phase. The charts on the back of this page from Chapter 10 might help guide your thinking.

Finally, read the "Analysis" and "Lessons Learned" sections from the handout. Assess your plan and how the corporation handled the situation. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Compose a 2 page paper (double spaced, standard margins, 12-point font) detailing your plan and your comparison and contrast between your plan and the actual one.