

Empowering the Future Practitioner: Postmodernism in the Undergraduate Public Relations Classroom

Stephanie Madden, Pennsylvania State University
Katie Brown, University of Maryland
Sifran Xu, University of Tennessee

Abstract

Although academics have worked to integrate postmodernism and public relations scholarship, little research has been conducted into how to bring postmodern principles into the undergraduate public relations classroom. This study analyzed how public relations educators integrated postmodern concepts into a large, introductory undergraduate public relations class through a lecture and in-class activity for student groups to design a postmodern organization. Results of this study indicated that this lesson forced students to question—many for the first time—their underlying assumptions about organizational structures and to begin to deconstruct public relations metanarratives. Students gained a deeper appreciation for the complexity of public relations and opportunities for organizational activism. Findings indicated that these types of alternative perspectives should be integrated throughout undergraduate public relations programs.

Keywords: postmodernism, organizational activism, public relations, power, undergraduate education

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Although academics, such as Holtzhausen (2000, 2002, 2012), Mickey (1997), Radford (2012), and Tyler (2005), have worked to bring postmodern approaches to public relations scholarship, little has been published on how postmodern principles may enhance students' learning in the undergraduate public relations classroom. While postmodernism is decidedly complex, it offers students a way to deconstruct the assumptions made about public relations and to reimagine public relations roles and structures. Public relations pedagogy should not only impart technical skills, but it should also empower future public relations practitioners to consider the consequences of power and ideology in public relations theory and practice.

To that end, we introduced postmodernism to a large, introductory-level public relations class at a mid-Atlantic public university through a lecture on the basic tenets of postmodernism and an in-class activity for student groups to design a postmodern organization. Through a thematic analysis of instructor interviews, reflexive teaching memos, and students' reflections on the lecture and activity, we found four primary themes around understandings of postmodernism: (1) emphasizing values and ethics, (2) questioning underlying assumptions, (3) adapting to change, and (4) challenging existing theory. Challenges to this pedagogical approach also existed, including the need to integrate concepts throughout the semester, provide tangible examples, and focus on specific aspects of postmodernism. This new perspective, however, empowered students to question fundamental assumptions about organizational structure and public relations practice. This study provides insight for public relations educators around the challenges and opportunities for integrating postmodern concepts into an undergraduate class.

Literature Review

This literature review begins with an overview of foundational concepts of postmodernism and its distinction from modernism. Next, it

focuses on postmodernism within public relations research. Finally, this review concludes with a discussion of postmodern insights into public relations pedagogy.

Modernism, Postmodernism, and Postmodern Tenets

Discussion of postmodernism is best understood when contrasted with modernism. Both perspectives are concerned with the ways that knowledge is created and justified, which formulates epistemological debates and inquiries about the creation, dissemination, and constitution of knowledge (Pritchard, 2009). According to Mumby (1997), four discursive positions encapsulate modernist and postmodernist approaches: (1) positivist modernism, (2) interpretive modernism, (3) critical modernism, and (4) postmodernism. Positive modernism focuses on the objectivity of knowledge, namely, the separation of the truth and the subject; interpretive modernism focuses on the consensus of truth, a socially constructive process where knowledge creation exists in matters of tensions; critical modernism raises suspicion about the assumptions of “a particular mode of rationality (such as capitalism) that has come to dominate the modernist project” (Mumby, 1997, p. 10); and postmodernism contextualizes knowledge in indeterminacy and paradoxes ubiquitous to human discourses (Cooper & Burrell, 1988).

Even though the boundaries between critical modernism and postmodernism may be blurry, it is important to note the differences before moving forward. Modernism is rooted in the Enlightenment Project, which is primarily concerned with reason and rationality (Cooper & Burrell, 1988). In this sense, critical modernism challenges and exposes assumptions about the societal structure and systems that “limit the possibilities for the realization of a genuinely democratic society” (Mumby, 1997, p. 9), but it preserves the connection to the Enlightenment Project through its emphasis on emancipation and freedom. In other words, critical modernism is not a radical overhaul of the fundamental

debates about reason and rationality but rather a question of the legitimacy of an overarching approach to achieving outcomes related to equality, democracy, and freedom.

Postmodernism encompasses too many perspectives to have a simple and united definition, and finding a unified definition is antithetical to postmodernism in the first place (Rosenau, 1992). Therefore, postmodern tenets identified by Mumby (1997) are summarized here to explain its major differences from modernist approaches. First, the understanding of a knowing subject is decentered and deconstructed. This tenet is intricately connected to the question of who the knowing subjects are and what represents knowledge. Second, postmodernism emphasizes that knowledge and power are inseparable concepts. The interrelation between knowledge and power is termed as the power-knowledge regime by Foucault (1980), where knowledge is the epistemological container of power and the very representation of power. Therefore, consensus is inherently problematic because coercion is unavoidable in this process. However, postmodernism considers power as “part of everyday life” (Hatch, 2006, p. 275) and not inherently positive or negative. Third, postmodernism posits that meaning emerges not only from the interactions of individuals and texts but also different discourses. More specifically, “meaning is never fully present in a text but rather is the product of a system of difference that is constantly deferred” (Mumby, 1997, p. 15).

These tenets can be helpful to make a distinction of postmodernism from critical modernism (and as an extension, critical theories). Critical theories are mostly concerned with assumptions made regarding various institutional discourses and power dynamics created by systems and social structures (e.g., Berger, 2005; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009), with the goal of creating knowledge that is liberating and emancipatory. They still abide by the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment Project. In comparison, postmodernism problematizes and deconstructs the ways knowledge

is represented and created, how discourses and structures are volatile, and how meaning can be only derived by relative references to other discourses.

The power of postmodernism lies in its focus on rupturing current knowledge systems. Knowledge is institutionalized in a way to make salient certain group's knowledge and silence others. Postmodernism highlights that the very production of knowledge is political and value-laden (Holtzhausen, 2012). The postmodern deconstruction process exposes implicit power relations in the knowledge structure and seeks alternatives. The value of postmodernism to public relations education lies in its ability to not only question assumptions taken for granted, as many critical theories do, but also encourage a learner of this perspective to be more conscientious about the very knowledge that is attached to structures and systems. In fact, many lessons in the undergraduate curriculum focus on institutionalized knowledge (Liinason, 2010). The purpose of engaging postmodernism in both research and education is to challenge the very existence of the field by pointing out its service to power, clarifying the subjective nature of the practice, demythologizing the representative "Truth" (Bardhan, 2003) and offering alternative representations and articulations.

Postmodernism and Public Relations

A postmodern approach to public relations challenges the powerful discourses that shape dominant ways of understanding, studying, and practicing public relations. As Radford (2012) explained, "a postmodern perspective allows one to consider PR as a narrative, a way of talking about the world, the people in that world, and PR's relationship with those people" (p. 50). Postmodernism in public relations sheds light on where to position empowerment in the intersection of research, praxis, society, and organizations (e.g., Edwards, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; L'Etang, 2009).

Postmodern public relations scholars have pushed back against the

acceptance of a functionalist approach to public relations that is rooted in capitalism (Radford, 2012). For example, Weaver (2001) challenged the assumption that public relations should only be examined as a tool of capitalism when public relations can and is used by those seeking to resist, disrupt, and dismantle capitalism and other systems of oppression. Furthermore, Bardhan (2003) critiqued the practice of universalizing Western public relations principles and theories and the application of them to non-Western contexts.

Although public relations can create, maintain, and reproduce powerful governing discourses, Holtzhausen (2000, 2002, 2012) argued that public relations can also resist and disrupt such discourses. As public relations practitioners are themselves subjected to exploitations from top-down capitalist organizational structures, these two dimensions of connection position the practitioners on two vectors that sometimes impose disturbance and inconsistency on their public relations practice. Through her work on postmodernism in public relations, Holtzhausen (2000) primarily focused on (1) postmodernism's interpretation of power and how it opens paths to dealing with a reality of public relations in society; (2) postmodernism's guidance on how to conceptualize institutional public relations practitioners (or public relations professionals in general) as activists; (3) how public relations practitioners are activists themselves in organizations; (4) postmodernism's guidance on why and how we deconstruct the construction of knowledge in the public relations discipline; and (5) postmodernism's insights on how to embrace diversity and dissidence, especially its implications on real-life public relations practice.

Public relations education needs to consider the impact of engaging postmodernism in the undergraduate public relations curricula, as explained by Holtzhausen (2000):

The only obstacle in the way of public relations practitioners operating as activists is located in the classroom. The field's case studies, texts, and research give preference to public relations as a management function of capitalist organizations, including state organizations. Even non-profit organizations, an important area of study in public relations, function on the close liaison between themselves and the corporations that fund them. Few have yet explored the possibility of studying the role, or the potential role, of public relations in activism, even while the knowledge and skills of public relations practitioners make them particularly suitable to become activist leaders in communities. This might mean that public relations practitioners line up on opposite sides of the trenches, but so do legal practitioners, marketing experts, and many other professionals every day. (p. 100)

Therefore, it is worth investigating how postmodernism might assist students' learning of public relations from a pedagogical standpoint.

Postmodern Insights Into Public Relations Pedagogy

Despite the call to integrate the postmodern perspective into public relations theory and practice by many scholars (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2002; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006), little attention has been paid to public relations pedagogy within this growing body of research (Duffy, 2000). Scholarship in general has taken the turn to recognizing the value of postmodernism (e.g., Marsh, 2008), but in the classroom, these same calls seem to be abandoned for more traditional, pragmatic, and functionalist approaches (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009; Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999; Stokes & Waymer, 2011). The idea of offering students practical applications of postmodern theory might seem counterintuitive (Toth, 2002). This, to a certain degree, reflects the fact that both critical and postmodern scholars have difficulties defending their positions as not contributing to the "cash value" of corporations (Mumby, 1997, p. 23). As Boyd and VanSlette

(2009) wrote, “a purely postmodern approach to almost anything is inconceivable” (p. 329). However, the ability to expose and challenge assumptions rooted in knowledge and social structures is paramount to a person’s educational experience (Rieckmann, 2012; Stokes & Waymer, 2011).

Deconstruction refers to a method that “not only exposes the limitations or inconsistencies of any particular set of conceptual oppositions and priorities in a text, but also shows how the text’s attempt to maintain this system undermines the very principles of its own operation” (Caplan, 1989, p. 267). Through engaging with deconstruction, Duffy (2000) showed that major public relations textbooks present a simple progression from the press agency model, which is heavily focused on publicity, to the two-way symmetrical model, which argues for mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In addition, public relations textbooks “offer a totalizing metanarrative of harmony and organizational success using instrumental communication and an evolving and ever-improving body of public relations knowledge and practices” (Duffy, 2000, p. 296). Duffy’s deconstruction of public relations textbooks illustrated that the knowledge construction of public relations follows the implicit notion of natural progression and glorification. Public relations is portrayed as ethical and socially responsible, based on the normalized conceptualization of public relations as two-way symmetrical communication. In the meantime, the emphasis on stability and maintaining status quo conforms to the interests of corporations that benefit from a stable environment (Duffy, 2000). When undergraduate textbooks are constructed in such a way that downplays or completely ignores the possible detrimental effects of public relations, it is not hard to imagine that students will take knowledge as it is presented in the textbooks without any reflection, impressed by the very power of public relations, but without realizing the potential perils of such

power.

Educators must encourage students to carefully and critically assimilate knowledge. The postmodern deconstructionist approach to delivering knowledge encourages students to have a more complete understanding of public relations. This also equips them with the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions about the impact of their actions in the future. In fact, Holtzhausen's (2012, 2015) idea of public relations as activism and practitioners as activists hinges on the awareness of power and control and the ability of practitioners to find their own voice. Presenting the knowledge as a determined fact without exposing the hidden tensions and assumptions aggravates the ethical crisis that has plagued the industry since its formation. Students in today's classrooms have the power to influence discourses that affect meaning making in society. Preconditioning students to postmodernism's fundamental idea of challenging and deconstructing metanarratives is not only our responsibility for a student's intellectual growth but also a moral obligation.

To truly position public relations as a contributive force to a democratic society, it is imperative to integrate postmodern thinking into public relations pedagogy. As Duffy (2000) argued, "the challenge is to encourage students to question their assumptions, to become self-reflexive, and to challenge the totalizing statements of their textbooks and teachers" (p. 312). Engaging postmodern thoughts into public relations classrooms helps educators rise to that challenge. With this in mind, we posed two central research questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, does introducing postmodern theory in the introductory public relations course encourage students to think critically about public relations practice?

RQ2: What, if any, challenges exist to introducing postmodern theory in the introductory public relations classroom?

Methods

Researchers designed a lecture and corresponding assignment to be implemented in an introductory public relations class at a flagship mid-Atlantic public research university. This assignment allowed students to apply postmodern concepts to public relations by having them deconstruct basic assumptions about public relations theory and practice and imagine new ways to define the role of public relations. The lesson comprised three major components: (1) giving a lecture that provided an overview of modernism and postmodernism and their relevance to public relations; (2) having students design an organization grounded in postmodernist principles; and (3) allowing students to ruminate on the experience through an optional brief, written reflection.

The two instructors (both of whom are also researchers) worked together to design a 50-minute lecture that consisted of an overview of modernism and postmodernism, as well as a discussion of the intersections of public relations, postmodernism, and modernism. Instructors emphasized the utility of postmodernism in public relations in the context of organizational theory and structure, public relations roles, different understandings of strategy and strategic planning, and leadership styles.

This introductory-level public relations class was structured in such a way that students met for 50-minute lectures twice per week. They also met in smaller lab sections once a week for 50 minutes. This postmodern activity was completed during the lab section immediately following the previous session's lecture. Students were divided into small groups of three to four students and asked to design an organization grounded in postmodern principles, articulating public relations' role within the organization, an overview of public relations structure and roles, strategic planning approaches, and leadership styles. They were given full creative license to develop the organization's name and mission statement. Groups were given approximately 20 minutes to complete this exercise; then, they

briefly presented their organization to the class. Finally, the instructor led a 10-minute debriefing session on the challenges of designing postmodern organizations. This study received IRB approval and the full details of the activity can be found in Appendix A.

Data Collection

Data collected for this study included written student reflections, teaching reflections from each instructor, and two in-depth, open-ended interviews with the instructors.

Written student reflections. Instructors gave students one week to complete an optional written reflection about their experiences with the postmodernism lesson for extra credit. Students who chose to participate uploaded their reflections to the course digital space. Instructors provided questions to prompt the students in their reflections that revolved around their understanding of postmodernism in the context of public relations and experience with designing a postmodern organization through the activity. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix A. In total, 51 out of 110 students submitted reflections to the instructors.

Teaching reflections. Both instructors memoed about their experience with designing the lecture, facilitating the lab activity, and assisting students in understanding postmodern concepts and applying them to a public relations context. The non-instructor researcher on the team recorded field notes from observing the lecture but did not attend the lab sessions.

Interviews. The non-instructor researcher conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with both instructors. Questions asked included, “What were students’ responses to the postmodernism lecture? What were students’ responses to the assignment to create an organization? What would you change or improve about this assignment?” Interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and took place at a coffee shop on campus where the researcher audio recorded the interviews for accuracy. The non-

instructor researcher then listened to and transcribed the interviews.

Data Analysis

Researchers used the six-phase thematic analysis process detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify patterns and themes within the data. The first phase of analysis involved familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading through the same five student reflections, the teaching reflections, and both interview transcripts. The second phase involved generating initial codes from the data and meeting for peer debriefing. After discussing the initial codes and interpretations of the data, we divided the remaining student reflections evenly between the group for analysis. The third phase involved collapsing initial codes into broader themes and finding representative quotes. We organized this in a shared Google Drive spreadsheet. Furthermore, we kept memos throughout the process and engaged in extensive peer debriefing throughout the data analysis process in person and through email. The team then reviewed the themes and met to define and name the final themes, which are recorded in the following results section.

Results

Critically Evaluating Public Relations Practice Through Postmodernism

We identified four key themes for how students critically evaluated public relations practice through postmodernism, which were a focus on value and ethics, a need to question underlying assumptions, the necessity of adapting to change, and challenging existing PR theories.

Value and ethics. Students felt that postmodernism offered a way to integrate discussions of value and ethics into public relations. One student wrote, “There are many aspects that need to be fixed in PR in the value and ethic portion,” and postmodernism was seen as a way to “change the way people believe and think about a situation.” For example, because of postmodernism’s focus on deconstructing current

systems, students brought in the example of gender-neutral bathrooms as challenging the way people think about current practices. In the same way, postmodernism in public relations is about understanding what systems are keeping people out and how to align public relations values and ethics with this focus on inclusion. Another student reflected that “the majority of structures in the workforce do not promote equality, gender fairness, and a non-hierarchy [sic] system.”

Students also understood the idea of value and ethics within the context of organizational activism. To students, “being an organization activist means having a strong understanding of ethical decision-making and a resistance to dominant power.” The idea of ethical decision-making included “fighting for the rights of both the employees and customers of a company.” Therefore, students embraced postmodernism as a way that organizations can maintain fair and ethical practices. Because of the focus on organizational activism, there was a missed opportunity for students to be more self-reflexive about their own positions related to power and privilege. Students were only seeing dominant power structures as something to be resisted rather than something they may contribute to and actively benefit from within an organization.

Question underlying assumptions. Through this lesson, students learned to question the underlying assumptions of how society operates. One student noted, “The whole idea and concept of postmodernism made me question a lot of things in today’s society, and why they are the way they are.” Several students noted that this activity took them out of their “comfort zones” as it made them “question everything.” Students recognized how ingrained modernism was in their worldview because it was challenging to think of another way of creating organizational structures, developing organizational roles, or implementing different leadership practices. One student wrote, “Trying to divert from these preconceived notions of organizational structure in order to form a

postmodern organization was difficult. Yet, it was also the best part of the assignment.” Others recognized that the assignment was difficult for them because thinking against the modernist training they had received required them to unlearn a lifetime of cultural knowledge. Students also recognized that postmodernism was not just about pointing out these underlying assumptions, but to “challenge and change those systems.”

Adapting to change. Students took away from this lesson that “postmodernism is all about change; it argues that there is no absolute truth.” This idea of embracing and adapting to change was “the aspect that has the greatest use in the PR world.” In addition to adapting to change, public relations practitioners can be agents for change. One student recognized how “societal and organizational structures can be reinvented,” and the role that public relations can play in that. Another student noted, “Public relations practitioners have to work with the company and the public as well as from managers to employees to relay certain messages to implement the changes.” In recognizing the need to adapt to change, students also recognized the utility in postmodernism to help organizations and public relations practitioners deal with unpredictability. This was most commonly articulated as the unpredictability presented by crisis situations. For example, one student reflected, “By incorporating postmodern principles you are preparing your organization or company’s public relations team to know how to deal with a crisis that was not a predicted outcome.”

Challenging existing PR theories. Given that postmodernism was presented in an introductory public relations course, many students had just begun learning about public relations theories rooted in systems theory and other modernist principles. Therefore, introducing a completely different paradigm from what they had previously been learning in the class was jarring. One student noted, “The utility postmodern principles have on public relations is that it questions and challenges PR theories,

which allow us to discover different forms of PR in each setting.”

Interestingly, although not explicitly taught, the instructors for the class noted that students inherently thought that postmodernism principles were antithetical to profit making. Students interpreted the previous theories taught in the course as corporate and profit-driven. One instructor noted that the organizations that students designed as postmodern were all nonprofit:

When we were talking about postmodernism, we didn't say that postmodernism is nonprofit. Or postmodernism is not about profit. But at the end, after the activity, basically all the organizations are nonprofit. They didn't come up with any for-profit organizations. So, I'm thinking they might see a fundamental contradiction between for-profits and postmodernism.

Challenges to Introducing Postmodernism to Undergraduate Students

Given the abstract nature of postmodernism, especially to an undergraduate audience, it can be difficult to conceptualize where to even start with integrating basic postmodern principles. Three primary challenges emerged, which were the need to *integrate concepts throughout the semester, provide tangible examples, and focus on specific aspects of postmodernism.*

Integrate concepts throughout the semester. One of the main challenges for instructors in integrating postmodern principles into an introductory public relations class was that it felt disconnected from previous content. Students need to first have a grasp of modernism before they can even begin to comprehend postmodernism. As one of the instructors said, “The first thing is that we need to ask students to think about the modern assumptions. They have to understand what the modern assumptions are.” Helping students understand the dominant paradigm in public relations as modernism through the semester can make the transition to talking about postmodernism smoother.

Rather than focusing on postmodernism in only one 50-minute lecture and then following up with an activity during the discussion lab, instructors felt it would have been beneficial to integrate concepts throughout the semester. Taking a more critical bent in an introductory public relations class would encourage students to consider their underlying assumptions about public relations earlier in the semester. One of the participating instructors noted incorporating deconstruction principles into a news report assignment throughout the semester. For this instructor, integrating postmodern principles served a larger purpose in the classroom:

I think it should be, we give lip service to this whole diversity, this and that, this is what it's actually about. Actually trying to understand people and why they are offended by this or why this becomes a crisis. Or why it becomes an issue. Or why somebody is going to like this. And the whole idea of corporate responsibility. All of that we get at in these news reports, and I think that should be integrated throughout the semester.

Provide tangible examples. Even before talking about the application of postmodernism to public relations, it was helpful to give students examples of modernistic practices in their everyday lives. For example, one instructor had students deconstruct principles of modern architecture to understand why buildings followed a certain design, such as having a blueprint and room number. This example helped students to understand that “modern assumptions are about efficiency; they’re about this idea of regulation or organizing.” In the lecture on postmodernism, the instructor also used the actual class structure to get students to think about how certain organizational structures can limit the free flow of information and disempower certain people. In the large lecture course, students have to work through the two course teaching assistants to get their questions answered and have limited interaction with the professor. However, for a

class of 120 students, this type of format makes it easier for an instructor to manage.

In addition to providing tangible examples of modernism in practice, instructors also offered alternative perspectives on public relations practice to help students think outside of the box. For example, in the lecture on postmodernism, the instructor discussed how one single person can be an organization. The example used was of a public relations practitioner who depended on her networks to set up her own business to consult organizations. A student group generated the example of a co-op structure as operating under postmodern principles.

Focus on specific aspects of postmodernism. Given the complexity of postmodernism, it is important to choose specific areas to focus on in the undergraduate public relations classroom. For this activity, one instructor noted, “We were overly ambitious in asking them to look at structure, leadership styles, and practitioner as activist.” Rather than trying to cover all these different aspects, the instructor explained that “if we had just focused on structure, we would have had a better time of really getting them to think in depth on the ways in which structure affects you.” Structure and roles were discussed as the potentially most important topics to cover in an undergraduate public relations course. Other topics, such as leadership style and practitioner as activist, may be more appropriate in subsequent public relations courses after students have a firmer grasp on the foundational concepts of the discipline.

Discussion

One of the main aims of this project was to empower the future practitioner by giving students the tools to become critical consumers and producers of public relations knowledge and practice. Despite the challenges faced in implementing this lesson for the first time, students walked away with a newfound postmodern orientation towards public relations. Repeatedly, students articulated that the “most important thing

they learned” was, as one student put it, “to not accept things just because they have always been that way. Society is the way it is because of social constructs; it is not the absolute truth.” This is an encouraging result, given the focus on a modernist and functionalist perspective on public relations in public relations pedagogy (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009; Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999; Stokes & Waymer, 2011) and the difficulty scholars have faced in integrating the critical perspective in undergraduate public relations classrooms (Duffy, 2000; Hodges, 2013).

The goal of this project was not to diminish or deny the importance of technical training in undergraduate public relations pedagogy but rather to caution against the consequences of building public relations education solely around these approaches. It is important to relentlessly reflect on the current state of public relations education and devote time and effort to developing public relations pedagogy that better prepares students for future challenges. Integrating postmodernism into public relations education can add much needed nuance to the classroom experience and enrich the training and coursework already in place. Pushing students to identify and then to go beyond the underlying assumptions of dominant understandings of the practice of public relations and its role in society opens up incredible possibilities for the intellectual and professional growth of the student. As we foster this sort of growth in students, we are working to equip the public relations workforce with those same skills, which can have a profound impact on the practice of public relations itself.

Students who do not develop critical skills are less able to understand and meaningfully contribute to important social, political, and economic conversations (McKie & Munshi, 2009). Integrating a postmodern perspective throughout public relations education better enables students to understand how organizational culture and structure benefit some individuals and groups while marginalizing others. To overcome the realities of a flawed system and to change the system itself,

public relations practitioners must be equipped with the ability to identify and locate injustice and the skills necessary to reimagine the practice of public relations in ways that overcome these issues. Lessons like the ones highlighted in this essay have the potential to build that sort of practitioner. A postmodern perspective provides students with valuable insight and skill necessary to not only effectively deal with change but to also become instruments of organizational change.

In that vein, another aim of the project was to introduce students to the possibilities of public relations in the context of activism, and the public relations practitioner as organizational activist. This was a less successful endeavor for several reasons. Instructors struggled with fitting the entire lesson into the allotted time, which led to certain topics getting shortchanged. Future iterations of this activity should designate more time to introduce students to Holtzhausen's (2012) conceptualization of public relations practitioner as activist and to public relations in the context of activism and social change. In addition to providing them with critical skills, increasing the visibility of public relations jobs that fall outside of the corporate realm is an important part of providing a well-rounded public relations education.

A postmodernist approach in the classroom also allows for students and educators to confront the complexities of public relations practice (Boyd & VanSlette, 2009). This makes for practitioners who, put simply, can do their jobs better. Instructors encouraged students to question underlying assumptions and metanarratives of public relations to better understand their audiences and publics, design more effective materials and campaigns, and facilitate more meaningful and just relationships. Students repeatedly articulated ways in which postmodernist ideals could help them as public relations practitioners in ensuring a focus on values and ethics, as well as adapting to change.

What we are proposing here is not simply the introduction of one

or two isolated lessons on postmodernism into public relations classes, although that is certainly a place to start. Activities like this one can serve as an introduction to this sort of thinking about public relations, with more advanced classes offering additional critical training. The students who participated in this exercise walked away from an introductory public relations course with basic critical skills and an intellectual curiosity about public relations that should continue to be nurtured throughout their education. We are advocating for a commitment to integrating alternative perspectives as part of students' critical training throughout undergraduate public relations programs. One way to do this is to rely less heavily on textbooks in introductory public relations courses. Duffy (2000) demonstrated how textbooks contribute to public relations metanarratives and obscure the diversity of thought happening within public relations scholarship and practice. Reviewing the syllabi for introductory public relations courses is a practical place to start. Are all the readings for the course chapters from one textbook? If so, how can different readings and media supplement or even replace the textbook chapter materials? Instructors should include blog posts, podcasts, and even videos that center non-Western, non-white, and non-male perspectives in an effort to confront public relations metanarratives. This type of content not only engages students but also provides a richer overview of public relations practice.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations of this study. First, the written reflection was not a required exercise, which may have skewed the data to overrepresent or underrepresent certain perspectives. Second, we acknowledge a heavy reliance on the work of Holtzhausen (2012) as the basis for both the lecture and activity, which is only one perspective on postmodernism within public relations. Finally, time constraints forced instructors to trim the lesson, giving students less time to absorb the

material, design the organization, and debrief the activity.

Continuing with this project, we intend to teach this lesson again within another introductory public relations class with additional time allotted. We will again ask students to produce in-class and written reflections but will also conduct follow-up interviews and focus groups with students to better understand how students experienced this activity and examine whether or not they met our learning outcomes. Future research should adapt this lesson to study it in the context of other public relations courses at other colleges and universities. It is our hope that public relations scholars will continue to design lessons and activities that integrate postmodernism and critical theory into public relations undergraduate programs. The impact of these exercises on public relations students should be further studied. A longitudinal study could also be conducted with students who had postmodern principles integrated into their public relations courses to see if and how this may influence the way they practice public relations.

Conclusion

As the educators of future generations of public relations practitioners, we must reflect on the assumptions that govern our own teaching. We must find ways to meaningfully disrupt pedagogical processes that limit our students in public relations theory and practice. As such, we must help our students deconstruct public relations metanarratives by questioning the underlying assumptions and seeking out alternative articulations. In these alternatives lie the great power to reimagine and expand the role of public relations in society.

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Appendix A

Postmodernism in the Introductory PR Class Activity Description

This lesson is designed to provide students in an introductory public relations course with an alternative perspective on public relations theory. We suggest these issues be brought into the classroom midway through the semester after students are familiar with the basic theoretical approaches of public relations. Although not required, we suggest assigning students part or all of chapter 5 from Holtzhausen's (2012) work *Public Relations as Activism: Postmodern Approaches to Theory and Practice* to read for the day of this lesson. This chapter details the postmodern turn in organizational theory as it relates to public relations.

We recommend devoting at least one full class period to lecturing on the basic tenets worked of modernism and postmodernism, which is adaptable to a 50- or 75-minute class format. It is important

to emphasize the utility of postmodernism in public relations within the context of organizational theory and structure, public relations roles, different understandings of strategy and strategic planning, and leadership styles. Instructors should focus on the differences between the modern and postmodern perspectives on these issues. For example, modernist approaches focus on strategy from a top-down perspective while postmodern approaches focus on a bottom-up emergent strategy. One tangible example for students that worked well was to use the class structure to encourage students' reflection on how certain organizational structures can limit the free flow of information and disempower certain people. In a large lecture course, students must often work through course TAs to get their questions answered and have limited interaction with the professor. But, for a class of 120 students, this type of format makes it easier for an instructor to manage, highlighting modernist assumptions of efficiency and control.

During the next class (or lab) period, briefly review the main ideas about modernism and postmodernism that were articulated during the previous session. After this, you can have students form groups of 3-4 to design a postmodern organization for 30-40 minutes. Students are instructed to focus on deconstructing underlying assumptions of organizational structure, public relation's role within an organization, strategic approaches, and leadership styles. Students will develop their own organization grounded in postmodern principles. Students should be given creative license to develop a name for their organization, as well as a mission and vision statement. After completing the exercise, student groups should briefly present their organization to the class.

Debriefing

Debriefing after the activity is one of the key components of this lesson and should be allocated for at least 10 minutes. This debrief should focus on the challenges of designing a purely postmodern organization.

Was this even possible for your students? What aspects were hardest to conceptualize through a postmodern lens? What balance should postmodern approaches strike with modernism? What tools can either perspective offer to future practitioners when faced with workplace challenges? How can the postmodern perspective help to facilitate organizational change? What does it mean to be an agent of organizational change? Why is it important?

Students often find it difficult to start this activity as modernist assumptions are so ingrained in our ways of thinking. Once students start to brainstorm, though, ideas such as a worker-owned coop and gender-neutral bathrooms emerged. Students also thought that a postmodern organization would be one that fought for the rights of employees and customers of a company.

We also suggest assigning a short written reflection due a week after the activity so that students can further consider their experiences with the postmodern lesson. Reflection questions revolved around their understanding of postmodernism in the context of public relations and experience with designing a postmodern organization through the activity. The four questions asked were: (1) What aspects of the activity were hardest to conceptualize through a postmodern lens?; (2) What, if any, utility do you think postmodern principles have in public relations?; (3) What is the most important lesson you learned from this activity?; and (4) What does being an organizational activist mean to you?