A "DYNAMIC" PUBLIC RELATIONS CASE CLASS

I don't know anything about science and you want me to say what?

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Sports and entertainment often top the list of specialties that undergraduate public relations and communication majors say they want to pursue professionally. Or they may know they want to go to law school, or work for a non-profit, either in the arts or social services.

But suggest that they consider going into public relations for scientific or technical organizations, or ask what they think about headlines on science policy decisions that may affect their health, what they eat, the air they breathe, how they get to and from campus or work, and a host of other issues of contemporary life… and their reactions frequently fall silently to the classroom floor.

Indeed, a key policy area that receives less attention in many public relations courses is strategic analysis as it relates to broad policy issues that make a significant impact on society, especially in the sciences. As our seniors graduate and become decision-makers themselves – voters, taxpayers, consumers, community leaders and policy makers – it makes sense to acquaint them with tools to help them deal with the complex choices they soon will face. This means being able to articulate the messages and strategic roles that communication and public relations play in managing an organization.

One approach to encouraging students to look at the big picture is a "dynamic" case method that provides a bridge connecting both lay and scientific perspectives. This can provide them an interdisciplinary framework for applying the public relations management theories and principles they have studied to date to a current problem in a "real world" simulation. It can acquaint pre-professionals – both communicators and scientists – with ways to improve decision-making on scientific issues and simultaneously to acquaint scientists with ways to improve how they communicate about scientific information with lay policy-makers. The structure gives undergraduate students a stage from which to experience the role of the "practitioner in the middle" (Rogers, 1986) and engage in the strategic decision-making process.

An interdisciplinary approach

Given the differences in outlook toward science, science education, and communication among practicing scientists, students, and public relations professionals (Cobern, 1989; Rabino, 1994; Rowan, 1999; Priest, 2001), a linking of related disciplines represents a step toward bringing about increased understanding among them all. Majors from any one department can learn from majors in another. The dynamic case format draws on the literature of online course design, public relations management, and science communication, bridging academic research and current practice in public relations.

While most case classes look at programs or campaigns that already have occurred, forward-looking scenarios make students think for themselves. One role frequently attributed to public relations professionals is that of a boundary spanner (White & Dozier, 1992), someone who brings information about external publics and news developments to the organization's management, and vice versa. To achieve this, practitioners conduct environmental scans, especially helpful in issues management. This becomes a natural extension from assignments in writing classes to the case class. The "what if" questions posed through scenarios help students work through ways to handle uncertainty in their organizations' external environments, while recognizing a variety of possible outcomes (van der Werff, July-August 2000).

The problem-solving approach in this course unit emphasizes symmetrical communication (Grunig, J.E., 1989; Grunig, J.E., & Grunig, L.A., 1992). The purpose of this model is to facilitate understanding and communication, based on research about publics. A theory of particular interest and relevance for the dynamic case is that of coorientation, which considers the level of agreement and degree of accuracy of organizations and their publics with regard to their perceptions of each other (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

Choice of issue(s)

My classes build the dynamic unit around public debates on food and agricultural biotechnology. This issue lends itself well to understanding public issues processes. The subject area is richly diverse in viewpoints among the myriad organizations involved. It brings into sharp focus the difficulties of communicating with publics that have different world views, since scientists tend to think in terms of "facts," while non-scientists often make policy choices based on "values."

To pique interest among the high percentage of students who either are not especially interested in science or who think they don't like it, this topic is one that can appeal through other practice areas: corporate communication, issues management, public affairs, government relations, consumer relations, activist relations, media relations, non-profit and humanitarian interests, NGOs, international relations and globalization, and others. In terms of communication styles, the organizations with a stake in the real-life debate undertake serious, issue-oriented efforts involving both rhetoric and symmetrical communication, as well as asymmetrical persuasion and activism sometimes for its own sake. There are educational and informational campaigns that have been successful and those that have been failures, as well as elements of stuntsmanship that are clever attention-getters if not always strategic.

TPR submissions are accepted based upon editorial board evaluations of relevance to public relations education, importance to public relations teaching, quality of writing, manuscript organization, appropriateness of conclusions and teaching suggestions, and adequacy of the information, evidence or data presented. Papers selected for the PRD's top teaching session at AEJMC's national convention and meeting TPR's publication guidelines can be published without further review if edited to a maximum of 3,000 words (including tables and endnotes). Authors of teaching papers selected for other PRD sessions are also encouraged to submit their papers electronically for the regular review process. For mail submissions, four hard copies of each manuscript must be submitted. Names of authors should not be listed on the manuscript itself. A detachable title page should include the author's title, office address, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address. Final manuscript must be in a readable 9-point type or larger and total no more than 3,000 words, including tables and endnotes. Upon final acceptance of a manuscript, the author is expected to provide a plain text e-mail version to the *PR Update* editor. Back issues of TPR are available on the PRD website:

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Class introduction to the dynamic case and role-playing

Introductory activities range from my own brief presentation of the topic accompanied by reading assignments; to watching a recent news video (PBS and Frontline both have tapes available that present an overview of the issue, media coverage, and interviews with both supporters and opponents); to a presentation by an expert guest speaker. Class discussion considers whether a spokesperson necessarily must be a science specialist when communicating with key publics.

Delegating roles is a key part of organizing this segment of the course. To increase buy-in among the students, I try a learner-centered approach (Azevedo, 1998; Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000) by naming broad categories of stakeholders (for example, corporate, government agency, consumers, news media, scientists and agricultural producers, international organization, or food retailer) as well as several prospective "client" organizations within each category. Students self-select both the category and a single client, ultimately forming teams of three students each to function either as in-house counsel or outside agency representing that client.

Students participate in several Web-based forums through the classroom intranet.

In the classroom intranet, such as WebCT or Blackboard, students participate in several Web-based forums throughout the case. Before we get under way with full-blown role-playing, I ask for an inventory in their own voices to find out what they know or believe, or think they know, about the topic first. Eventually this first post serves as a point of reference against which they later reflect whether and how their opinions have changed, or been reinforced. Where food and ag biotech is concerned, this presents an opportunity to learn not only about a new subject, but also new ways of thinking and analyzing what is going on around them.

Structure

Student teams explore the public relations dimensions of food biotech from multiple stakeholder perspectives, along a continuum from supporting through opposing. They examine how these different stakeholder interests communicate and negotiate on behalf of their organizations regarding environmental impacts, pros and cons of applying contemporary technological solutions to improving food production and distribution, health concerns, and the prospects for sustainability. Numerous approaches exist for teaching case studies classes, within both the public relations curriculum and business schools (Kruckeberg & Bowen, 2003, in press; O'Rourke, 2000; Rangan, 1996). The pedagogical mix described here integrates asynchronous learning for research and discussion, role-playing and Socratic Dialogue for negotiation and conflict management, and development of a mini-campaign to synthesize the experience.

Phase One: Online research and discussion

Online discussion provides an additional useful forum to develop this skill (Altschul, 2003), although some educators have found no significant difference between in-class and asynchronous discussion (Kelleher & O'Malley, 2001). Regardless of the mode, however, the ability to listen attentively to what someone else is saying and to give relevant feedback is a primary skill for effective communicators and strategic counselors.

The online part of the case lays the foundation for Socratic Dialogue panels in class. The format is also adaptable in the classroom to foster creative and analytical skills often cited as essential for meeting professional requirements in a constantly changing environment (Gower & Cho, 2001).

After the inventory of initial knowledge described above, the first major step in the role play is to conduct online research about client organizations on the organization's own Web site, critics' Web sites, and Lexis-Nexis. As students learn, they inform each other of their findings through several asynchronous discussions. Writing now in their clients' voices, they post what they discover about the client's position on the issue, with a discussion of the organization's "persona" as it communicates and makes decisions.

Discussion proceeds next to a perception or coorientation stage to identify what each client thinks other stakeholders think about them and vice versa, and why. At this point students also begin enacting online the communication behaviors and strategies of their organizations.

In one recent class, the team representing the FDA initiated and responded to posts from several of the other stakeholders as follows:

Subject: Government

The FDA conducts extensive studies on all biogenetically engineered food products before they hit the market. We take special care to make sure that every product created is just as safe (if not more safe) than the original host. However, we do recognize consumer concerns with these new products and we wish to work with all sectors of the food industry, including producers, consumers, and marketers to ensure that everyone is as confortable (sic) and content with the scientific progression of food products as possible….

With this in mind, we are announcing today plans to research and develop a method of product labelling that will be required for all genetically engineered foodstuffs. Our research includes the possibility of a new logo that will serve as a universal symbol for biogentically (sic) engineered products.

Subject: Re: Media

The FDA would like to make arrangements where we could meet with the media and discuss our plans on a public issues campaign for the topic of genetically altered foods. Our position is to educate the public about this issue so that they may feel more comfortable with the idea. The FDA is willing to share whatever information we have on the issue with the media. We are aiming to use various kinds of media to make the public aware of our future plans.

Subject: In Response to Concerned Consumers

The FDA fully understands the concern on behalf of the consumers. Though many consumers may believe that GM foods have just arrived on their shelves, biotechnology has been used for a great deal of time. In 1992, the FDA published a policy explaining how existing regulations for food safety would also apply to bioengineered foods. GM foods are altered using biotechnology to help make the crop produce better. There is nothing different with the end product. There are voluntary guidelines that allow companies to label GM products. The reason that they are only guidelines is because of our previous position that GM foods are no different.

The FDA's job is to ensure the safety of all food regardless if they are regular or GM foods. It is our position that all GM foods are safe and that consumers should in no way be alarmed. As earlier released, we are planning are beginning a public education program to inform the public on the issue of GM foods. We have also established a website which can help answer questions of consumer and allow them to submit their comments to the FDA.

The Greenpeace team submitted a plea for legitimacy, phrased perhaps different from how the organization might speak in reality, which gave us an opportunity to talk in class about power and power-control relationships:

Subject: Greenpeace-->Re: Government

…I noticed that something was absent, however, from the FDA's statement regarding how it will work with all sectors of the food production industry to arrive at mutually acceptable food products. What about Greenpeace? Doesn't the FDA care

to include Greenpeace in this discussion? We may have a radical reputation yet we are reasonable people who can negotiate civilly. The FDA need not be afraid of Greenpeace. Please include us in your negotiations, we deserve a seat at that "conference table" because we represent the interests of many people. Those people's views should not be ignored.

Technology thus supports learning, rather than being an end in itself. It provides a space for students to report, formulate and test their own ideas and arguments (Morgan, 2000), leading to their ability to participate in the next phase, "live" panel discussions.

Phase Two: In-class Socratic Dialogue Panel Discussions

The Public Relations Society of America uses Socratic Dialogue panel discussions modeled after the popular PBS programs moderated by Fred Friendly (Galloway, 1999) as a management training technique. At the professional level, a panel of experts responds to a hypothetical crisis scenario for a given industry during an intense hour and a half of questions from a moderator. Success depends on choosing a critical issue and posing a scenario that "realistically demonstrates how the issue might affect a wide variety of stakeholders and observers of the industry" (Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], n.d. a). Intended to demonstrate the power and value of public relations with key management audiences (PRSA, n.d. b), the format works as a springboard for students to extend their own analytical and critical thinking skills, essential for meeting professional requirements in a constantly changing environment (Parkinson & Ekachai, 2002; Gower & Cho, 2001). For undergraduate students, who don't yet have substantial professional experience or expertise, each panel lasts about a half hour.

The classroom situation comes slightly closer to Socratic method than the PRSA programs in that the starting point for discussion is a subject about which the students know very little at first. Up to the time of the in-class panels, they have phrased and rephrased what they have been learning, advancing to the point where they can take their client organizations' viewpoints and relate them to the beginning of the case. When they are confronted with scenarios that now ask them to attempt communication solutions, they must finally apply the other public relations theories discussed in class and test what is effective. This synthesis is the heart of the process (Munns, 2001; Strauss, 2000).

Every stakeholder team is represented by a different member over a series of three different scenarios. Non-participating team members "prompt" the panelists during the discussion or prepare relevant communication activities, for example, complete media kits, flyers, posters, and mock protests. An engaging panel is one in which all parties come to realize the value of dialogue throughout the problem-solving process.

Following the in-class panels, students "debrief" in a final online discussion by posting their overall reactions, what they learned, and how the entire study may have changed or reinforced their initial beliefs. Collectively, these activities give students a chance to examine the interchange and decision-making processes among publics who affect and are affected by broad policy issues.

Phase Three: Mini-campaigns

The final part of the dynamic case design segues to a brief campaign component emphasizing matching objectives and tactics to the right public(s). Each team develops a plan for its client, making recommendations to solve problems posed by the issues that emerged during the online and Socratic Dialogue phases. Teams present their proposals in class and evaluate which stakeholders they think actually are communicating most effectively in the real world.

Results and next steps

Student feedback in the online debriefing has yielded both support for the dynamic case process and suggestions to improve it. Some students prefer discussion only in the face-to-face mode, while others realize they have more time to think during asynchronous exercises.

Here's a sampling of student reactions:

"It was a good way to practice thinking on your feet because that is what PR practitioners will be forced to deal with. I think in the future I will be more confident when asked questions on the spot…. I learned more about dialogue. In addition, negotiation was very much evident in the panel discussions."

"…it was nice to split up into smaller groups and interact with everyone to present each side of the debate. I think that type (of) forum makes it easier to learn (the) truth about the issue. Plus, being involved in kinesthetic learning allows much more information to be retained than just listening to lecture."

"Many times group work is difficult to coordinate, but the online discussion forum made it easy to collaborate (on) ideas."

"Working with groups and having discussions online helped me understand a little bit more of what many people knew already about biotechnology… we needed to step back and think about all the different ways that each organization can express their facts, beliefs and research to their publics in a fair and unbias(ed) way."

In terms of teaching technique and course design, a shorter turnaround timeframe for each online forum compels a quicker response from students. A concentrated six- to eight-week module may be a workable timeframe for the entire unit.

Online discussion brings in guest experts who might not be able to visit the classroom in person.

By responding to scenarios about the importance of food, environmental and health crisis issues, students become better positioned to understand several headline cases in the sciences, for example, the Alar apple scare or Mad Cow disease. Because of the nature of the different roles undertaken, the dynamic case appears to be a natural candidate to involve students from a variety of other disciplines.

Collaboration opportunities exist with colleagues on campus and at other universities; using the online discussion forum provides a useful tool for this kind of expansion. In addition to the asynchronous features, the chat, or synchronous, capability can offer yet another resource, especially to bring in guest experts who might not be able to visit the classroom in person. These voices can address and answer questions from the entire class, selected teams, or students from more than one campus. Additionally, the scenario-writing activity lends itself to future collaboration prospects. Individual student teams can be assigned to write a situation for the other teams to respond to during the in-class panels, or guest experts may be invited to challenge the class with a scenario from their own organizations. Each semester leads to further refinements, making the interactions among students, instructor and guests an ongoing construction of knowledge. On balance, the dynamic case contributes to professional development that applies theory to real world situations involving interdisciplinary problem-solving.

Sample Scenario:

Feeding the Hungry in the Developing World

It is 5 p.m. on Tuesday evening. The Embassy of Zambia is hosting a reception for decision-makers and opinion leaders who may be able to help them with their urgent need to reduce hunger. The reception is being catered by Restaurant Nora, the first certified organic restaurant in the U.S., located in Washington, D.C. Among the guests will be representatives of the U.S. Food & Drug Administration, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and the Organic Consumers Association. U.S. trade negotiators have just worked out a deal with several

agribusiness companies to donate 100,000 tons of corn and cheese products to Zambia and other developing countries. These products – that have been produced using techniques of genetic engineering – have been sold and consumed for several years in the U.S. with no ill effects. Zimbabwe has agreed to accept the shipment. Zambia is undecided. More than 30% of its population is suffering from malnutrition as a result of inadequate food supplies and faces starvation in the not-too-distant future. Outside, Greenpeace is staging a demonstration against U.S. exports of GE food products, and a media crew has arrived on the scene from Channel 7 (the local NBC affiliate). It's been a slow news day and the TV people smell an opportunity to get a quick story on the 6:00 evening news.

Entering this scenario, your client is either for the use of biotechnology to produce food and agricultural products, neutral, opposed, or conflicted.

Every time you hear one of the other stakeholders present his or her position, try to enter the dialogue to persuade that stakeholder to adopt your position. Initially, try to express positions, actions, and communications that you've learned are typical of your client. That means you may stick to your guns, or you may engage in "principled negotiation" like the activity we did in class with the oranges, or points in between. Likewise, you may communicate asymmetrically ("scientific persuasion") or you may try a more sophisticated coorientation approach, or anything else you think might work.

Your goal is to resolve this situation to your client's satisfaction. After some initial discussion, if you feel it is necessary to counsel your client to adopt a new perspective on the issue, please express your advice out loud when appropriate. If your client is reluctant to heed the wisdom of your expert counsel, be prepared to tell what steps you would take to convince the organization's leadership to come around.

Consider:

- Communicating Uncertainty, Ch. 11, The Importance of Understanding Audiences (Rogers)
- Matters of trust and credibility where scientific uncertainty is concerned
- Cultural and international factors that affect public perception
- RACE or ROPE processes you might follow in choosing an appropriate response

(NOTE: Additional instructions were provided that were specific to each team.)

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