Scholar as Social Connector
effectively linking public relations theory and practice in this fast-changing digital world

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Public relations scholars have long faced the challenge of connecting theoretical principles to contemporary professional practice. This challenge escalates in today's fast-changing digital world. Indeed, the public relations scholar increasingly plays the vital role of connecting theory to practice, in order to help students develop multi-platform communications expertise and become trusted, effective practitioners.

For much of the past decade, digital experts have discussed the 'social connector' role, or the active steps one can take to make and leverage professional or personal contacts in a constantly connected digital world (Boyd, 2004). In similar fashion, the public relations scholar who is a social connector identifies and addresses gaps between traditional education and the ever-evolving demands being faced by new professionals entering the field. These gaps may range from specific technical expertise, such as managing an online community or developing multi-platform communications strategy, to leadership skills, such as critical thinking and the ability to positively influence others, which are increasingly important for young professionals whose work is so often focused on social media and other highly transparent forms of communication.

This article examines the fast-changing public relations landscape; defines the social connector role and its significance; and explores the growing need for leadership competencies among new professionals. Using a pedagogical case study, the article features best practices and actionable tips that scholars may use to become social connectors – and more effective stewards for the academy and industry.

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A FAST-CHANGING DIGITAL WORLD

The public relations profession is projected to grow more than 20 percent by 2018 (U.S. Bureau of Labor). The growth over the last decade in professional public relations has driven ever-increasing classroom enrollment. At least 284 colleges and universities in the United States – and many more abroad – now provide public relations education in the form of a major, minor, or sequence of courses (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). Some universities favor a theoretical basis; other programs focus on applied practice. There are even differences of opinion about the value of online courses and virtual internships. Meanwhile, the industry's expectations for young professionals are changing rapidly due to technology, economics and demographics.

Technological considerations

Social media and other technological innovations are greatly influencing how public relations is practiced. Nearly 85 percent of public relations agencies believe that social media capabilities are either extremely or moderately important to clients (Council of PR Firms, 2010). In fact, among independently owned firms, nearly 20 percent expect demand for traditional media relations services to decline by 2015, while more than 90 percent believe demand for social media services will increase (Worldcom, 2010). Technology has enabled organizations and individuals to share information and establish relationships solely with people who share like-minded views. Public relations professionals must build rapport with a growing number of specific stakeholder groups, while maintaining a consistent message platform and organizational reputation. This, clearly, can be a challenge.

Economic considerations

Moreover, the global economy has struggled since 2008, placing further demand on all industries, including public relations. By 2020, the average lifetime of a corporation on the S&P 500 is expected to be only 10 years, down from nearly 50 years in the 1930s (Foster & Kaplan, 2000). Organizations expected to thrive will continually re-think, refine, and re-engineer their products, services, and operations to adapt to changing or anticipated market conditions. This process will involve greater intelligence-gathering, consideration of and planning for multiple future scenarios, and stronger internal collaboration and communication (Bryan & Farrell, 2009; Courtney, 2001). In a world that increasingly demands creativity and innovation, leaders are needed who can inspire, challenge, and motivate employees in more personal, less bureaucratic ways (Conley, 2009).

Just as the economy and social media have required organizations to be more nimble and transparent, there are fewer budget dollars to maintain the staff necessary to manage such growing demands. Recent graduates often must take on greater responsibility, which in turn requires a higher level of leadership competency.

Demographic considerations

Of additional concern, at least in the United States, is that there are too few people with the experience needed to fill society's future leadership needs. Generation X, or those born from roughly 1965 to 1980, has only 46 million members, or slightly more than half of the number of people who are part of the Baby Boom generation, which has 80 million members and fills most of the current leadership roles in society (Lancaster & Stillman, 2001). The oldest members of Millennial generation, or those born from 1981 to 1999, are just approaching when they will be expected to grow into leadership roles. This gap creates an even greater need for public relations students to hone leadership skills before they enter the workforce. It also reinforces the importance of scholar as social connector.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTORS

To effectively adapt public relations pedagogy to an evolving digital world, it is important to understand several important terms, namely social consumers, curators and connectors:

Social consumers

Consumers, perhaps more than ever before, live in social spaces nearly 24/7 thanks to participative technology such as Facebook and Twitter. This makes them 'social consumers.' In such a constantly connected world, these social consumers need and want personal connections (Craven, 2011).

College students and young professionals are perhaps the ultimate social consumers. These Millennials, who range from age 18 to 33, exceed every other generation in using social networking sites, taking pictures with Instagram, and contributing user generated content through Tumblr (Pew Research Center, 2013). Platforms that are visually based, rather than simply text-based – examples include Instagram, Tumblr, Pheed and Vine -- are increasingly popular with Millennials.

Social curators

Having students as social consumers, professors increasingly take on the role of a 'social curator' – an expert who continually builds upon an existing body of knowledge with emerging knowledge about real-world application of such principles. Social curators focus on establishing networking relationships with others on various digital platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or other niché social networking sites. These individuals are focused on giving back to the community (reciprocity) by providing a centralized location for sharing this information and opinions with others (Ammann, 2011).

Social connectors

Social connectors establish mutually beneficial relationships using social networks, and by elevating their own online presence, in terms of expertise, interests and ambitions (Boyd, 2004). For professors, this means building and leveraging social networks to implement pedagogical methods much richer and dynamic than the traditional classroom experience. Application of technology must be interactive, dynamic, engaging and, above all, perceived as valuable and worth the time to discerning young adults.

It is not enough to simply want to be a social connector. The scholar who aspires to this ideal must commit to a new way of thinking and working. Being a social connector takes persistence, patience and, above all, diligence. To be on the right path, the aspiring social connector must develop expertise not only in emerging media, but leadership development, as well.

GROWING NEED FOR LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES AMONG NEW PROFESSIONALS

Scholars have long defined public relations as a strategic management function – that is, a discipline requiring professionals to think and act like leaders (Dozier & Broom, 2006). A tough global economy and the real-time visibility associated with social media have put unprecedented pressure on recent college graduates as they enter public relations practice. With more work to do and often fewer colleagues with whom to share the load, the new practitioner needs leadership skills commensurate with these expanded responsibilities. The social connector helps students develop essential leadership skills before they enter the workforce.

Leadership development is generally defined as a set of work-related experiences that help expand a person's self-awareness and skills relative to influencing group behavior and achieving team goals (Avolio, 2010; Groves, 2007; McCall, 2010). In this evolving economy and technological age, though, there is a growing need for social connectors in the academy who can help expedite the leadership

development process. The seeds of leadership can be planted in college, by bringing more work-like experiences and insights into the classroom (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995).

Effective social connectors understand the principles of leadership development. They create and leverage personal learning networks – or dynamic connections with established mentors across multiple industries and organizational types – to help catalyze students' leadership development before they enter the workforce. They understand how valuable professional mentors can be to students, and they embrace the use of social media platforms, Skype, Google+ and other technology to connect students with such role models. Moreover, social connectors themselves model many of the public relations leadership competencies both inside and outside of the classroom. This includes demonstrating a passion for the profession, serving as a change agent, employing transformative and inclusive styles of leadership, leading by example, and exemplifying a strong ethical orientation (Berger, 2009). In short, the social connecter in public relations education often reflects the very qualities one would expect of a leader who is actively practicing in the field of public relations.

EFFECTIVELY LEVERAGING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS
a case study

The 'social connector' role was actively applied and assessed during consecutive terms at a private university in the Midwest. A tenure-track instructor intentionally leveraged social connections on behalf of the public relations majors (n=23) enrolled in an upper-level course in strategic planning, required before students can enroll in the senior capstone. The course integrates service learning, or applying principles on behalf of a community partner, with problem-based learning, a method often used in business communication courses where students learn by tackling real, complex problems (Bowdown & Scott, 2003; Pennell & Miles, 2009). More specifically, students work in small teams to develop comprehensive public relations strategies – proactive and reactive -- for a nonprofit organization.

The instructor began the semester with a consulting exercise; the 'practice client' was identified and procured via social networks. Having the students attempt to provide real-time consultation to a practice client early in the semester was a risk-free, assessment-free experience for students, intended to serve as a baseline measure of their confidence in consulting. (See Table 1.) By midterm, students had met with the actual client, developed reactive strategies for the organization, and had the opportunity to practice these in a crisis simulation. This exercise was observed via videoconferencing by a professional with expertise in reputation management, who provided the students with real-time feedback. Additionally, the students had begun using Twitter and other digital tools to monitor issues and develop recommendation. They met via

videoconferencing with a business development consultant from another state, to learn how to best present issues and recommendations to a client. Midterm measures of confidence (Table 1) were drawn using the same survey instrument as the baseline/pre-test.

By the end of the semester, students had prepared, presented and defended their work in front of the class and a community panel. The panel included members of the nonprofit organization's leadership team, as well as a public relations professional in a related industry, identified and booked via social media networks. Prior to this final presentation, each team met virtually with the PR director of a large agency specializing in digital media. The director provided constructive feedback on how to tighten the plans -- with particular emphasis on the digital and social media aspects -- and how to best present the ideas to the community partner (i.e. client). Measures of confidence were drawn, once again, using the same survey instrument.

Self-reported confidence among students (n=23)			
	Beginning of semester	Midterm	End of semester
Confidence level in consulting for a real-world client	3.0	3.8	4.1
using a 5.0 scale with 5.0 being very confident			

As noted above, the students' confidence grew, collectively, 22 percent by the end of the semester. Open-ended survey questions revealed that their understanding of consulting also grew over time, from simply "being organized" and "sharing knowledge" to "asking questions," "listening," "understanding industry issues and their possible impacts," and "maintaining emotional composure" to provide more effective leadership and direction. A statistical correlation cannot be drawn between the students' growth and their having had multiple interactions with active professionals, both in person and virtually. Nonetheless, notable growth did occur among students, and surely the instructor having applied a more active 'social connector' approach helped contribute.

BEST PRACTICES
FOR ASPIRING SOCIAL CONNECTORS

Social networking

Public relations scholars have advocated for viewing the profession as both an art and a science (Harlow, 1980; Caywood, 1987; Hutton, 1999). To balance both of these perspectives and become effective social connectors, scholars should:

- be active on social media networks, both professionally and personally

- model effective online reputation management

- encourage collaboration and partnership between students and professionals via social media and other digital means

Social media continue to be used most frequently by younger generations (Pew Research

Report, 2013) especially on the visual and microblog sites like Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr. Students "create a virtual identity and network with friends and family" which can and should expand to include faculty and professionals (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007, p. 2). Scholars who live by example and actively participate in social media will establish trust and credibility among students and professionals alike.

Leadership development

As noted in the case study, a social connector can use technology to foster students' leadership development. Best practices include:

- videoconferencing with guest lecturers who have specialized expertise

- inviting professionals to moderate online discussion boards

- having professionals review students' progress on projects that have yet to be completed

The social connector's professional networking, especially on behalf of students, can literally span the globe now. This creates opportunities for much more dynamic mentoring relationships, including mentoring that is short-term and tailored to a specific situation (Walton, 2011).

As emerging leaders, students should be coached on how to manage online reputation. This includes doing periodic searches on themselves via Google, as well as social media search engines like Samepoint, Topsy and Social Mention. In addition, a scholar-turned-social connector should encourage students to monitor the traffic, links, and comments on personal blogs (and other digital profiles online) to understand their digital footprint and assess how others perceive them.

CONCLUSION

Being a social connector means that you live, breathe, and research the field. Scholars must be vigilant about keeping pace with technology, as well as the changing expectations for public relations practice. Scholars who become social connectors help students thrive in this fast-changing digital world. Connecting students with professional mentors, and leveraging technology to facilitate real-time coaching and collaboration, are simple steps any scholar can take to better prepare students for the evolving demands of the public relations field.

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