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Motivating Students to Become Receptive to Research: How to Overcome the Fear of Numbers in the Introductory Public Relations Course

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(Editor's note: Dr. Stacks is the author or co-author of a number of articles whose focus is the teaching of research methods. His Essentials of Communication Research (with John Hocking [HarperCollins, 1992]) is a popular undergraduate communication research methods text.)

Contemporary America is quickly becoming an "information society." No part of American enterprise is or will be exempt from processing and assessing information gathered as a natural part of doing business. This is well understood by many academic and professional departments. In public relations, however, there is still a nagging resistance to quantitative research in general and evaluation research in particular. This paper examines the role of research, particularly that of quantitative research, and how it should be addressed in the introductory public relations course.

Over the years it has become more apparent that today's public relations students are competing -- and often failing in that competition -- with students less prepared for careers in public relations, but who understand how to process and interpret data -- numbers. The days when public relations students could argue their competence based on an ability to present ideas or concepts in ways that the public would accept are long gone. Today's public relations recruiter seems more interested in hiring a business student than a communication major. Why? One compelling reason seems to be the business student's grasp of what data are and how they should be interpreted. They are good data technicians. To compete with them, then, public relations students must understand what data are, how they are collected, and what the data mean in relation to the research question they addressed.

Curricular Questions

Where should this begin? How should it be incorporated into the curriculum? How much time should be allotted? Research in general should be emphasized in each class taught in a public relations curriculum. "Research," however, should be broadly defined, include both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, and indicate practical application at all times. The best place to begin is in the introductory public relations course, whether that course is "public relations and society," an initial writing course, or a campaign's course. The focus of discussion should be on how we evaluate the success or failure of the topics being examined based on research findings evaluating the topics under study. Thus, for instance, in a writing course we might examine the writing from a type/token ratio, a Gunning-Fog Index, or other quantitative indices of writing. The key is to begin to work with data gathered by the student on his or her own work.

A particular problem my students have is understanding how research is used. This I feel is due to a lack of focus on the role of research in public relations. A major advantage that business (and chemistry or biology or even journalism) students have is a focus on what their job requirements will be upon graduation. An accountant understands that he or she will have to work with information; the marketing student understands that evaluation is based on numbers of products moved or sold; the management student understands similar outcomes. All these force the student to focus on the role of research and numbers. Interestingly, neither the public relations practitioner nor student is particularly focused on the role of research.

How much time should be devoted to research? Approximately one week's worth of lectures or discussion is needed to introduce the basic components of research: what numbers are and what they mean, descriptive statistics, and a quick overview of research methods (to include library research, focus groups, and survey methodology). Amplification of these areas should then be conducted throughout the course.

Understanding Data

A major problem confronting most students today, and this is not restricted to public relations students, is a lack of understanding of what data -- numbers -- mean. Discussions with faculty who teach communication research methods classes suggest that it is not the numbers that bother students, rather it's what to do with those numbers that causes concern. Quite simply, numbers (data) have no meaning, they only reflect a quantification of some theoretical position. Students need to understand this. My experience is that once they do, students begin to find ways of interpreting the data in a descriptive way. This is the first step to understanding what data are and what they do: they serve to describe a large population in some theoretical way.

As an aside, at the introductory level data should be introduced as descriptive only (crosstabulations, frequency tables, percentiles, means, medians, modes, standard deviation, and variance). Inferential analysis is both complex and beyond the scope of most introductory students. The instructor's ability to discuss inferential statistics will obviously impact on that discussion; I have found it best to stick with descriptive analysis. Interestingly, most PR practitioners analyze their data (when they gather it) descriptively. They leave the inferential analyses to research groups or academics who consult. Obviously, then, a public relations student who understands at least the gist of descriptive data analysis will have a better focus on why research is necessary in later classes and when actually working as a practitioner. I find that students who understand the role of research in public relations do quite well in internships and are asked more often to stay on than those who do not.

Evaluation Research

What kinds of research should the introductory class focus on? Evaluation research is an appropriate place to begin. Evaluation research offers quantitative support to the argument that the public relations campaign was effective. It is conducted in some form or another in almost every public relations agency in the country, and in most corporate public relations divisions. What does it consist of? Perhaps the most basic form of evaluation research is found in counting published press releases in the infamous "clip file." The number of times a press release is published is offered to the client as evidence that the agency has done its job and provides some indication of the scope of the releases' distribution. This is a simple, yet effective, way to introduce research in the introductory level. It introduces the student to frequency counts (number of clippings), crosstabulation (number of clippings by type of media outlet), and parametric analysis (mean, median, and mode for clippings, and standard deviation).

When introducing evaluation research it is appropriate to discuss both survey and focus group methodology. Students understand why surveys are conducted -- they are bombarded with surveys daily. Discussion of the correct way to conduct a survey and design a questionnaire provides students criteria for conducting and evaluating survey research. It also provides an introduction to a pre- and posttest measure of campaign success.

It is important to discuss the role and scope of focus groups before introducing survey methodology. Students intuitively understand the goals of focus group methodology, both as a method of conducting research and as a measurement technique. As a methodology, they quickly learn that messages must be analyzed (and here a quick note on content analysis adds to the impact of the discussion). An interesting and popular activity is to conduct a short focus group about the role of research in the class. In larger classes students can be grouped and then report their findings either as a presentation or a press release.

Again, the focus on evaluation research should provide a jumping off point for conducting research and evaluating existing research in later courses. The stress on a research focus provides a different interpretation of what they read and learn.

Involving the Student as a Motivating Device

It is axiomatic that the more students are involved in their education, the more they learn and the more motivated they are to pursue that education. The same is true with motivating students toward research and data. Given the broad base of the course, we must cover a variety of subjects over a 10- to 16-week period; the problem with introductory classes is that the content itself often limits that involvement. What the research component can do is help to maintain that involvement by providing a focus which serves in turn as a motivating feature in the study of public relations.

There are two different strategies available when considering student involvement. One (the simpler) requires that students assess research. The other (more difficult) has the students actively involved in a research project. At the more advanced level, the actual conducting of research, of getting students' feet wet, provides the impetus to know more. (Graduate students find this out when they work with faculty or in groups to solve a particular problem.) My particular approach is to work through a project that has been done and have students prepare for different parts of the project as the term progresses. A project along the following lines could be modified for local interest.

Problem. A local public relations firm was engaged to conduct research for a public relations travel campaign for the middle Florida Keys. In preparing for that campaign they conducted a literature review of all publicity generated in the Dade and Broward county area over the previous year, focusing mainly on the print media. They then conducted several focus groups among the Keys "natives" (those who lived in the area year round) that focused on travel concerns. Based on these focus groups, an image survey of Dade and Broward county residents was conducted concerning the middle Key area and its attractions. From the survey a public relations campaign was conducted, reflecting what was learned through the research. Finally, several evaluation surveys were run to evaluate campaign success and compared to a number of tourist indices (such as a license plate counts).

Assignment. As part of the classroom activities, assign students to groups. Each group is told it would be preparing background for a possible public relations campaign highlighting local travel to the middle Keys. Each group then carries out a limited literature review, examining not only the copy generated over the period of interest, but also creating a clipping file which it then analyzes and writes an analysis of. Students are next required to run a focus group of their friends, writing up both an analysis of the results and a sample press release for inclusion in a press kit based on their findings. Each group writes a questionnaire for use in establishing the image of the middle Keys regarding travel, activity, and food. At this stage data (can be created) are provided for a "prototype" questionnaire. The students then write up their interpretations of the data and how they would go about promoting the project and evaluating its success. (A more advanced class might actually conduct the survey and write it up.)

Continuing the Motivation

Once students understand that numbers -- data -- are an integral part of contemporary public relations, they tend to be less fearful of them. Again, the numbers themselves rarely induce the fear or paralysis that facing a blank piece of paper does, but a few students will remain fearful. However, if later courses require that they continue to collect and analyze data, this fear is usually reduced significantly. Where this approach seems to pay off is at the senior-level campaigns class where an actual campaign is conducted. It also pays off for those students participating in local PRSSA chapters which either have agencies or work with local non-profit campaigns. My observations have been that once the students begin to see the "whole picture," they are better able to focus on how each class they take relates to their future in public relations.

Summary

This paper describes an approach to research that helps the student focus on how research -- numbers, data, quantitative methods in this case -- fit into their curricular needs. It has been argued that an understanding of what constitutes research and how it is conducted in the introductory public relations course helps reduce the fear many students feel when they are given data and asked to make some sense of them and focus on the entire public relations process of evaluating, campaigning, and evaluating. There are students, however, who have no fear of numbers, instead they fear the interpretative type of research that has no numbers from which to draw conclusions.

Research does not occur in a vacuum. It should be remembered, and it should be stressed in all public relations courses that good, quality research is research that is triangulated -- it examines both the qualitative and the quantitative data that are collected when working on a project, campaign, or even something as simple as a press release. A focus on research, why and how it is conducted goes a long way in reducing not only a fear of numbers, but also a fear of advanced classes as well.

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