



Teaching Public Relations

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Adding Service Learning to the Corporate Communications Curricula

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The demand for graduates with technology-based skills increases the pressure on public relations programs to integrate computers and Internet-based skills into their curricula. The battleground for recruitment is now being waged on the frontier of on-line communications. Therefore, reputation, success and even survival of many communications programs may hinge on the ability to keep pace with the changing digital environment while maintaining a strong foundation in writing and liberal arts education. The question is not when, but how to effectively integrate computer-based instruction into the public relations curriculum.

As end-users buying the "product" of the university curriculum, corporations demand employees who are educated and prepared to work in environments where computer-based communication is heavily used. This need is pushing companies to look beyond monetary donations to affect change in university programs. At the same time, Community Relations has gone beyond "balloons and T-shirts" (CCCR, 1994) to involve the corporation's core competencies. One initiative, known as the Bell Atlantic/Boston University Public School Partnership (PSP), fills this need by forming a corporate-community partnership in Boston area public schools but can be replicated in most university settings.

Murnane and Levy (1996) identify the ability to use personal computers as one of the six "new basic skills" required for persons to get a middle-class job. Any program that seeks to prepare students for performance in the workplace or for study in the university must solve two problems: lack of equipment and quality teacher training.

In a recent study of 900 public schools, the U.S. Department of Education found that just one in five teachers used advanced telecommunication in the classroom and only 13 percent of these public schools required teacher training. At the same time, public schools are faced with increasing enrollments, inability to raise residential taxes and a decrease in state and local funding (Zernike, 1996).

So the current environment paints a picture in which corporations realize the need for greater involvement in the surrounding school systems. Concurrently, universities seek innovative ways to integrate the technology into their public relations curricula; and public schools wrestle with how to best integrate technology into their programs with an emphasis on teacher training. These three needs combined gave birth to the Bell Atlantic/Boston University Public School Partnership.

Conceptual Foundations

The academic foundations that give support to the PSP model are found in three primary areas: (1) business' role in society, (2) public relations pedagogy and (3) diffusion of innovations. These research streams form the basis for viewing the PSP as a means by which to enhance the educational experience of public relations students and to maximize the likelihood of technology adoption by public school teachers.

Business and Society

The linkage between business and society is hardly a new concept. The two form an interactive social system wherein one influences the other. They are intertwined so completely that an action taken by one will inevitably affect the other (Post, 1996). Public schools have become a primary stakeholder of the corporation and of the university. Gaining widespread attention in the early 1980s with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the state of our public school system has come under much scrutiny. Corporations realized that the public school system is a primary resource for its workforce. Therefore, business has become increasingly involved in the process of educational reform.

The development of and changes in the corporate community relations function followed. Companies began to go beyond IRS guidelines for giving to social organizations. The corporate community relations (CCR) function evolved from a "collateral system with the corporation and the community in an exchange relationship, to an interpenetrating system relationship, where the two are less easily distinguishable" (Preston and Post, 1975).

Later, scholars began to look at public relations as being "better defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community" (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988; Hallahan, 1996). CCR has been redefined since as the "state of relations between the company and the communities (local, national or global) in which it has a presence or impact. It encompasses programs which advance the interest of both the company and its communities" (Burke, 1994). The CCR function now enables the corporation to achieve four long sought-after goals: to become the neighbor of choice, the investor of choice, the employer of choice and the supplier/provider of choice (CCCR, 1994). Corporations see that giving to society can make them competitive and socially responsive.

Corporations now are selecting "core community concerns" with which to match their core competencies. The Bell Atlantic Foundation, the corporate philanthropy arm of the telecommunications company, is concerned primarily with education through technology, neighborhood initiatives and teacher training. This focus pairs well with the company's core competency: connectivity.

Public Relations Pedagogy

In recent years, many curricular discussions have been centered on increasing the number of management classes for public relations graduates (Van Slyke Turk, 1990; Grunig, 1993). While this is an integral part of the future of public relations education, the need for technology and business partnerships is even greater. The author of this paper maintains that management skills can be realized through a student's participation in a corporate-community alliance. Calls for businesses to step in to help shape the knowledge base for public relations education is documented as well (Scribner, 1993; White, 1993; Post, 1996).

A relatively new teaching concept has emerged at the college level in the last three years called "service learning." Partly it is an outgrowth of the \$40 million a year in federal funding provided by the National Community Service Act, which is also responsible for creating Americorps. But, it is also an outgrowth

of the need to expand the public relations curricula.

In a service learning environment, students take classes that integrate classroom instruction with community service. Students learn skills, such as marketing, technology or language in the classroom and then put them into practice in the community. It is suggested that these students are better prepared for the workplace and are more sensitive to social inequities. A survey conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute found that "students who had participated in service work were much more likely to do volunteer work in the community, help others and socialize across ethnic and racial lines (Yemma, 1997).

Diffusion of Innovations

The diffusion of innovation tradition includes several models, each focusing on a different view of the diffusion process. Of particular interest to this paper is network analysis, which identifies the communication structure and flows in a system by using interpersonal communication relationships as the units of analysis. Most diffusion networks are homophilious, that is, the degree to which individuals who communicate are similar, particularly in socio-economic standing (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1964; Rogers, 1995).

The PSP model recognizes the homophilious nature of the individual public schools. It takes advantage of the acceleration of innovation resulting when individuals share common meanings and mutual understandings. The model infuses the initial innovation into the homophilious school networks via the strength of "weak network ties" with a respected, outside source (Boston University College of Communication PR students).

The PSP Model: How to form a partnership

The Boston University Public School Partnership brings together the power of corporate sponsorship with the resources of the university to serve the needs of public schools seeking to integrate new technology into their curricula. The case is being built that such a relationship is mutually beneficial allowing each participant to achieve related and synergistic goals.

Replication of the PSP begins with the task of identifying a corporate sponsor with a commitment to community participation as well as one with a strong technology base. Bell Atlantic emerged as a natural selection based on its documented history of commitment to neighboring communities. The Bell Atlantic Foundation's Excellence in Education Program routinely provides funds for non-profit organizations such as universities. For the first time, however, it began offering funds to public schools targeting grades 7 through 12 in urban areas of Massachusetts and New York.

Perhaps more important is the natural tie between Bell Atlantic's core competencies in communication products and the skill sets to be nurtured through the PSP program. Through several exploratory conversations with Bell Atlantic, it was discovered that the company is seeking initiatives that specifically use technology in collaboration with community service. Programs that could highlight connectivity products, such as ISDN or Ethernet, were of particular interest. Despite the convenient tie-in to product marketing goals, the strongest factor pointing to Bell Atlantic as a likely corporate sponsor was the Bell Atlantic Corporate Philanthropy mission: excellence in education. Any program teaching computer-based skills would simultaneously train future workers, indoctrinate future consumers, and contribute to Bell Atlantic's social responsiveness. It also provided Boston University public relations students with a viable service learning project.

The next step required identifying an urban public school willing to participate. Criteria include: a strong

desire to use company products to integrate technology, the recognition that its teachers need training and the lack of sufficient financial assistance through traditional means. A partnership school must also be willing to form a partnership over the course of one academic year. Schools were identified from areas where such a program might have maximum impact; specifically schools were selected from socio-economically challenged communities. Two separate focus groups were held with teachers in these schools to determine their desire to participate in such a program and flush out areas of particular need for computer-based training. The meetings also served to identify potential change agents within the schools.

The program calls for a school-based technology coordinator, a faculty advisor and a handful of PR graduate students for each school. Training sessions are conducted at the school and teachers are offered Professional Development Points (PDP). The training includes a workbook companion to guide the introduction of Internet-based training in general research skills, social studies and science modules. During the training, graduate students, who are enrolled in the public relations master's degree program and have completed requisite courses in interactive communication and community relations, are assigned to each teacher as facilitators. These students will remain assigned to their respective schools to assist in training and adaptations necessary to the program.

This component of the model increased the university's enthusiasm to extend its faculty energy and resources for the project. Graduate students witness and participate in a community relation's effort tied to a company's core competencies and the bottom line. Students were also exposed to the value of community service and teacher training allowing them to gain sensitivity to the importance of social equity in access to information.

This experience supports the university's larger mission in two ways. First, public relations students are better prepared for the diverse workplace (Scribner 1993, White 1993, Post 1996, Waddock 1995). Second, the management and coordination responsibilities assigned to students gives them experience in real-world settings (Van Slyke Turk (1990) and Grunig (1993). The PSP model defines a mutually beneficial relationship between corporate sponsors, graduate public relations education and community concerns.

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