

How We Teach Graphic Design to Public Relations Students

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ABSTRACT

This two-survey study was motivated by the Commission on Public Relations Education's report. The first surveyed AEJMC unit heads (272, 72% response rate) to determine who teaches graphic design courses for public relations students. The second surveyed those educators (127, 53% response rate). This study concludes that public relations programs are implementing the Commission's call. However, more of these courses need to be designed to meet the specific educational needs of public relations students.

A special issue of *Public Relations Review* identified visual/interactive communication, along with ethics, management, and campaigns, as four new core competencies for public relations majors. The article noted that "substantial advances in the applications of video and computer-based technologies" now requires visual and computer literacy of public relations majors. It listed "using computers to present and display messages, PageMaker/desktop publishing, and Internet applications including Web page design," and four broadcast graphic skills as vital.¹

Yet little is known about the type and extent of graphic design and desktop publishing instruction for public relations students. What percent of universities offer graphic design courses? Do public relations students taking such courses get comparable experiences from university to university? Are their instructors qualified public relations educators? Are students taught in similar ways with similar teaching methods? Do they utilize the same software and hardware, produce the same kinds of projects, and have similar assignments?

The purpose of this study is to provide information about graphic design instruction for public relations students in AEJMC schools. It is in response to the Commission on Public Relations Education's 1999 report and various articles in the Spring 1999 issue of *Public Relations Review* based on research included in the Commission's study.

The Commission on Public Relations is composed of educators from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), the International Association for Business Communicators (IABC), the International Communication Association (ICA), and the Speech Communication Association (SCA).

These educators surveyed 1,500 educators and practitioners to determine the skills, knowledge and concepts that students at the undergraduate and graduate levels need in order to be successful in the field. They also considered characteristics of public relations educators, pedagogy, and assessment techniques needed to assure the students' success.²

The Commission noted that "students should be able to demonstrate knowledge of design and layout principles, computer skills, software proficiency and message design."³ Recognizing that larger public relations programs are better equipped than smaller ones to incorporate a greater variety of courses, the Commission suggested various ways of providing students with these visual communication, graphic design and desktop publishing competencies. For small programs, they suggested combining these competencies with a message production course. For large programs, they suggested a separate course.⁴

Importance of Graphic Design Education

The Commission found visual/technological communication to be one of four areas of communication production and presentation skills important to success in public relations practice and, thus, necessary to public relations education.⁵

Before the Commission's report, prior studies had already noted the importance of visual communication and graphic design to the public relations field.

A 1997 study of integrated marketing communications (IMC) across four industries found that three types of publications – "trade publications," "collateral material," "trade promotions" – were among the most notable and most frequently considered forms of communication in campaign planning. The study also found that business considered trade publications as one of four activities deserving top consideration in the IMC mix.⁶

It was also noted in 1997 that public relations practitioners can communicate best with some publics with images and others with words, but that the most successful publications are those that appeal to publics through images and words that reinforce one another.⁷

In 1998, interviews were conducted with three organizations including a \$20-billion corporation, a national retail and distribution company with approximately 30,000 employees, and a major financial corporation in the Midwest with more than 850 employees nationally. The interviews revealed that internal publications provide a major way of communicating with employees.⁸

A 1997 national survey revealed that both educators and practitioners rated writing/editing and graphics/production skills among several important standards of public relations competence. However, educators rated writing and editing technical skills (4.02) and graphics and production technical skills (3.32) higher than did practitioners (3.47 and 3.06, respectively). Those conducting the survey concluded that continuing education and more articles in trade journals should address both types of communication to assure that practitioners meet basic standards. It noted that educators place considerable emphasis upon writing/editing and graphics/production skills and consider themselves strong in both.⁹

Yet public relations programs spend far more time teaching students to communicate verbally than visually. The Commission's study found that 14.6% of all public relations courses deal with verbal communications while none deal with visual communications. Visual communications could be included in the 9.8% "other" and 3% "special topics" categories, but even if all of these categories were devoted to visual communications, its instruction would not equal verbal communications.¹⁰

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. Authors of teaching papers selected for other PRD sessions are also encouraged to submit their papers for the regular review process. E-mail attachments in Word 97 (or earlier) or 3-1/2" diskette submissions are encouraged. Plain text e-mails or fax submissions are not accepted. 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 280 single-spaced column inches of copy (approximately 12 pages or 3,000 words), including title, author, footnotes, tables, charts and attachments. 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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Educators' Use of Technology

A decade ago, a survey of educators teaching desktop publishing considered them-

Table 1
COURSE TITLES
from most frequent

Titles	F
Graphic Design.....	20
Desktop Publishing.....	19
Graphic Arts.....	11
Publication/s Design.....	8
Graphics of Communication.....	6
Visual Communications.....	6
Public Relations Publications.....	5
Graphic Communication/s.....	4
Computer Graphics.....	3
Graphics.....	3
Media Graphics.....	3
Publication/s Editing & Design.....	3
Publication Layout & Design.....	3
Advanced Editing.....	2
Commercial Art.....	2
Communication Graphics.....	2
Editing & Design.....	2
Mass Media Graphics.....	2
Public Relations Techniques.....	2

Table 2
KEY WORDS IN COURSE TITLES
from most frequent

Words in Titles	F
Design.....	70
Graphics.....	69
Publications.....	37
Communication.....	34
Desktop Publishing.....	25
Electroic/Computer/Digital.....	18
Visual.....	14

Table 3
PRIMARY TEACHING AREAS
by prior public relations experience, degree in public relations and full-time teaching

PRIMARY TEACHING AREA	Prior PR experience N=122		Degree in PR N=123		Teaching full-time N=124	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
Public Relations.....n=24	22	2	13	10	22	2
Advertising.....n= 8	5	3	3	5	8	0
Journalism.....n=42	22	20	2	41	37	6
Graphic Arts.....n=24	9	14	0	24	21	3
Communication.....n=11	6	5	0	11	9	2
Visual Communication..n=11	3	5	0	8	7	1
Didn't provide area.....n= 6	5	1	1	5	3	2
TOTAL.....	72	50	19	104	107	17

Table 4
RANK
by prior public relations experience, degree in public relations and full-time teaching

RANK	Prior PR experience N=103		Degree in PR N=104		Teaching full-time N=105*	
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
Associate Professor.....	23	13	5	32	37	0
Assistant Professor.....	20	12	7	25	32	1
Full Professor.....	5	6	1	10	11	0
Instructor.....	10	2	1	11	10	2
Lecturer.....	4	3	1	6	4	3
Adjunct.....	2	2	1	3	1	3
Graduate Assistant.....	1	0	0	1	0	1
TOTAL FREQUENCIES.....	65	38	16	88	95	10
TOTAL PERCENTAGES.....	63.1	36.8	15.4	84.6	90.4	9.5

*Numbers differ because some respondents didn't answer all questions.

selves weak in desktop skills with most (83%) having to teach themselves on the job. At that time, 95% of responding schools noted that desktop publishing was taught by department professors. The most common format for classes was lecture/lab combinations (84%).¹¹

As a result, the few educators with desktop publishing skills have infrequently had public relations expertise. Furthermore, the Commission found that public relations educators are rather slow to utilize new technology in the classroom.¹² Thus, the Commission urged that faculty with specific training and professional experience in public relations acquire the competencies to teach desktop publishing and other new technologies.¹³

The Commission found that most (66%) of the educators responding to the survey use course Web sites, but "neglect the Internet's interactive potential," using it mostly for assignments (66.1%) and links to supplemental resources (61.5%).¹⁴ Public relations educators fail to use discussion groups to facilitate student-to-teacher and stu-

dent-to-student interaction, primarily due to "lack of institutional support" and educator skill deficiencies.¹⁵

The use of Internet and PowerPoint-type presentations is also minimal. Even though three-quarters of public relations educators have access to these technologies, little more than a third of those with access actually use it to present information to students.¹⁶

This lack of use of new technology appears to be shared by practitioners who teach part-time as well as full-time educators. Both groups rely heavily on "old media."¹⁷ However, the Commission found that practitioner educators were more likely than full-time educators to use the active teaching methods of case studies, full-blown campaigns and individual presentations. Yet they used the least active teaching method - lectures and guest lecturers - more than full-time educators.

Active vs. Passive Learning

Besides urging that new technological competencies be incorporated into instruction and assignments, the Commission encouraged educators to utilize more active learning for all classes:

For instance, students must at least understand how to access and navigate the Internet and understand how a Web page can serve as a communication tool (a message design rather than a software use focus). Educators do a disservice to students when they do not integrate the Internet and other relevant media into their pedagogy when possible. Students must appreciate the new media they will be using in the workplace.¹⁹

Educators responding to the Commission's survey agreed that students should participate actively in the learning process:

Class sessions and outside assignments that directly involve students in the learning process, making them partners in their own education, are preferable to those which make students passive recipients who memorize and recall information on an examination.²⁰

For graphic design courses, the Commission emphasized that assignments should heighten creativity and include projects, instructor critiques, professional critiques, portfolio samples and course exams. Teaching methods should include lecture/discussion and

demonstration formats, guest presentations, group work, computer lab exercises, field trips and projects for clients.²¹

Furthermore, the Commission noted that computer lab availability somewhat determines the active learning techniques that educators use. Those who dedicate lab space find it easier to use active learning strategies.

Finally, the Commission noted that active learning techniques are demanding and that "the investment of time and energy for the educator is far greater when active learning techniques are used."²²

The Commission further cited research for planning and evaluation as an important area of knowledge for all courses. This includes segmenting publics, determining the impact of actions and communications on publics, and evaluating the results of such actions and communications against desired outcomes.²³

To determine how the Commission's findings relate specifically to graphic design courses, the following research questions guided this study.

RQ1: What percentage of AEJMC schools require, recommend or don't have graphic design courses for public relations students?

RQ2: What are the most frequent titles for graphic design courses taken by public relations students?

RQ3: Who teaches graphic design courses taken by public relations students, as defined by rank, major teaching area, public relations practice, full-time vs. adjunct positions, and whether or not they hold degrees in public relations?

RQ4: What percents of instruction in these graphic design courses are devoted to the following: (1) lecture, (2) discussion, (3) computer lab exercises, (4) projects for clients, (5) individual presentations, (6) group presentations, (7) PowerPoint presentations, (8) overhead presentations, (9) demonstrations, (10) group work, (11) field trips, (12) guest lecturers, (13) case studies, (14) exams, and (15) writing assignments?

RQ5: How frequently do graphic design courses include three important planning and evaluation techniques: (1) identifying and segmenting publics, (2) ascertaining the impact of actions and communications on publics, (3) evaluating the results of actions and communications against desired outcomes, and how is each technique taught?

RQ6: How frequently do graphic design educators utilize new media technologies: (1) Web sites, (2) Internet, (3) PowerPoint presentations for instructional presentations and/or students' active learning?

RQ7: How frequently are the following 11 publications produced by public relations students in graphic design courses: (1) folders/brochures, (2) newsletters, (3) posters, (4) advertisements, (5) logos/logotypes, (6) letterheads, magazines, (7) business cards, (8) newspapers, (9) nameplates, (10) booklets, (11) annual reports?

Methodology

Methodology included two separate surveys. The first two research questions were answered by surveying AEJMC unit heads. Research questions 4-7 were answered by surveying the educators who teach the graphic design classes. RQ3 utilized information from both surveys. The surveys were primarily exploratory, with frequency statistics used to answer research questions.

First Survey. All 420 schools listed in the AEJMC directory were contacted by e-mail or postal mail; 54 were undeliverable and were eliminated from the census.

Based on the remaining 375 schools, a response rate of 72% was achieved with 272 schools responding. Of those, 18 noted that they have no public relations program. This left 254 respondents who provided information relating to the first three research questions.

Second Survey. Of the 254 usable responses from the first survey, 84 were subtracted because they replied that they did not have such a course. This left a population of 170 schools for the second survey. To this population, the 103 nonrespondents from the first survey were added to make a total population of 273 for the second survey.

When names were provided during the first survey, the second survey was mailed directly to educators teaching the graphic design courses. Of the 270 educators mailed the second survey, 13 were returned as undeliverable and 21 responded that they did not offer a graphic design course for public relations students. Thus, the total population for the second survey was 239, of which 127 responded, for a response rate of 53 percent.

The schools at which these graphic design courses are taught have a mean of 100 public relations majors, with a range from one to 500. Half of

the schools have 70 or more public relations majors. A quarter have 140 or more. Less than a quarter have 25 or fewer. Students annually taking graphic design classes range from six to 250 with a mean of 60. This mean represents two sections per semester at the ACEJMC specified enrollment for lab classes. The most frequent number was 30.

Results

RQ1: GRAPHIC DESIGN COURSES

More than a third (92, 36%) of the respondent schools having public relations programs require their students to take a graphic design or desktop publishing course. Another 78 (31%) recommend that students take such a course. Only a third (84, 33%) of schools don't offer such a course, but 10 (4%) of the 170 respondents that do, offer it through art departments.

RQ2: COURSE TITLES

After eliminating words like "introduction to" and "principles of," the most frequent titles were Graphic Design (20) and Desktop Publishing (19). Graphic Art was a distant third with 11 mentions, followed by Publication/s Design (8), Graphics of Communication (6), Visual Communication (6), and Public Relations Publications (5). See Table 1.

A tally of key words revealed that the most frequent words in titles are design (70) and graphics (69), followed by publications (37) and communications (34). See Table 2.

RQ3: WHO TEACHES COURSES

The first survey revealed that most of the graphics classes are taught by full-time faculty. However, 10 schools noted that their graphics courses are taught in the art department. Another 16 reported that their graphics courses are taught within their schools, but by adjunct faculty.

The second survey revealed that 86% of these educators teach full time, 59% practiced public relations before beginning their teaching careers, but only 15% have degrees in public relations. The largest teaching area represented by educators teaching graphics to public relations students is journalism with 42 educators. Public relations is

Table 5
TEACHING METHODS UTILIZED
in order of frequency

TEACHING METHODS	Number used	Number not used	Percent used
Lecture.....	123	3	97.6
Computer Lab Exercises.....	121	5	96.0
Discussion.....	109	18	85.8
Exams.....	99	27	78.6
Individual Presentations.....	82	45	64.6
Demonstrations.....	81	45	64.3
Projects for Clients.....	69	57	54.8
Writing Assignments.....	68	57	54.4
Overhead Presentations.....	67	60	52.8
Guest Lecturers.....	64	62	50.8
Group Work.....	57	70	44.9
Field Trips.....	45	81	35.7
PowerPoint Presentations.....	43	84	33.9
Group Presentations.....	29	97	23.0

*Some respondents did not respond about all teaching methods.

Table 6
PLANNING AND EVALUATION TECHNIQUES TAUGHT
with frequency of methods used

	Evaluate results against desired outcomes N=124	Ascertain impact on public N=124	Identify and segment publics N=123
Not Covered.....	62	75	45
Covered.....	62	49	81
METHOD OF COVERAGE			
Lecture.....	19	14	20
Student Assignments.....	14	8	8
Textbook Reading.....	3	4	10
Reading and Lecture.....	7	9	10
Lecture and Assignment.....	8	1	6
Reading and Assignment.....	1	1	2
All.....	5	6	15
Only Use Noted.....	5	6	7

Table 7
TEACHING OF NEW TECHNOLOGY
with frequency of methods used

	Take info from Web sites N=124	Design and produce N=124	Take info from Internet N=126	e-mail to communicate with you N=127	e-mail to communicate with classmates N=125
Not Covered.....	46	66	47	60	77
Covered.....	78	58	79	77	48
METHOD OF COVERAGE					
Student Assignments.....	43	21	40	27	17
Textbook Reading.....	2	1	2	9	4
Lecture.....	6	2	6	8	6
Lecture and Assignment.....	13	13	12	6	2
Reading and Lecture.....	1	1	2	0	1
Reading and Assignment.....	1	1	2	2	1
All.....	5	12	4	1	2
Only Use Noted.....	7	7	9	24	15

the next largest teaching area with 24. See Table 3.

The largest rank represented by those teaching graphics to public relations students is associate professor with 37 educators. Next is assistant professor with 33. An almost equal number of professors (11) and instructors (12) teach these courses. See Table 4.

RQ4: TEACHING METHODS

Most (97, 6%) of the responding graphic design educators utilize a combina-

tion of lab and theory instruction. The mean percentage of time devoted to lab instruction is 60% with 40% to theory. The mode for both is 50%.

These courses are taught primarily by a combination of lecture and computer lab exercises. More than 95% of the educators use this combination. Discussion is used by 86%, followed by exams by 79%, demonstrations and individual presentations by 64% each. See Table 5.

Table 8
PUBLICATIONS PRODUCED BY STUDENTS
with order of frequency

TYPES OF PUBLICATIONS	Number used	Number not used	Percent used
Folders/Brochures	99	28	78.0
Posters	90	37	70.9
Newsletters	88	39	69.3
Logos/Logotypes	88	39	69.3
Advertisements	84	43	66.1
Letterheads	73	54	57.5
Business Cards	67	60	52.8
Magazines	65	62	51.2
Newspapers	50	77	39.4
Nameplates	46	81	36.2
Booklets	40	87	31.5
Annual Reports	17	110	13.4

RQ5: PLANNING AND EVALUATION TECHNIQUES

Most (75, 60.1%) of the educators responding to this item noted that they ascertain the tactic's impact on the target public. Only half (62, 50%) evaluate results against desired outcomes, and slightly more than a third identify and segment publics (45, 36.3%).

The most popular method for teaching each of these techniques is lecture. See Table 6.

RQ6: NEW TECHNOLOGIES

More than a third of the educators responded that they teach new media technologies, with taking information from Web sites the most frequently taught (78, 63%), followed by taking information from the Internet (79, 62%), using e-mail to communicate with the teacher (77, 61%), designing and producing Web sites (58, 46.7%) and using e-mail to communicate with classmates (48, 38%).

The educators relied mostly on student assignments to teach these new technologies, followed by a combination of lecture/student assignments. See Table 7.

RQ7: TYPES OF PUBLICATIONS

Folders/brochures are the publication most frequently produced by public relations students in their graphic design classes. More than three-quarters (78%) of educators in this study assign them. More than 60 percent assign four other publications: posters (90, 71%), newsletters (88, 69%), logos/logotypes (88, 69%) and advertisements (84, 66%). More than half assign three others: letterheads (73, 58%), business cards (67, 53%), magazines (65, 51%). Newspapers are assigned by less than 50%. See Table 8.

OTHER FINDINGS

Most (120, 94.5%) of the graphic design courses are taught in a computer lab. Only seven (5.5%) are taught as theory courses.

The number of computers in the labs ranges from 5 to 75, with a mean of 19. The most common number is 16, which is the ACEJMC limit. Twenty of the educators reported 16 computers; 17 reported 20.

Most of the schools use Macintosh (87, 71.3%). Less than a quarter (26, 20.5%) use IBM or compatibles. Six (5%) reported using both.

QuarkXPress (71, 57%) is the most frequently used layout program with more than double the use of PageMaker (27, 22%). Almost 10% use both.

Microsoft Word (45, 40%) is the most frequently used program for graphing. Less than 2% use Deltagraph. Other programs account for less than 17% of use. The remaining use a combination.

Photoshop (95, 77%) is the most frequently used program for scanning. Only five (4%) use Ophoto and only eight (6.5%) use another program. The remaining use a combination.

Discussion

Results of this study are encouraging while indicating specific needs. For instance, it is encouraging that a third of public relations programs require a graphic design course and another third recommend one. However, more of these courses need to be designed specifically for teaching graphics to public relations students.

This will require that more of them be taught by public relations educators. Although

graphic design principles are the same across disciplines, public relations students need to base graphic decisions on the purpose of the communication, the target public/s and the key message. This entails blending graphic design and public relations theory to produce a unique course, one that is so different from graphic design courses taught through journalism and art programs as to warrant a unique title such as "Public Relations Publications." Yet only five schools responding to the first survey have such a course.

That the courses in this sample are not being designed for public relations students is obvious by the same number (less than half) of the courses that deal with segmenting publics, determining the impact of actions and communications on publics, and evaluating the results against desired outcomes.

On the other hand, publications produced by students somewhat represent those produced in public relations offices. The five most often produced in classes include two of those most common in practice (folders/brochures and newsletters). The remaining three (posters, logos/logotypes and advertisements) are probably produced more by agencies than by internal public relations offices. Unfortunately, the most important public relations publications (annual reports) are covered in only 13% of the courses, while newspapers, which are rarely produced in public relations offices, are covered by 39%.

It is encouraging that most of the graphics courses are taught in computer labs so that students are learning to implement theory with technology they will use on the job. It is discouraging that the educators in this sample teach electronic technologies no more than the educators in the Commission's sample.

Nor are the educators in this sample utilizing many active learning techniques. Outside of enabling students to work on computers, little other active learning is being used in graphics classes. Most are taught through the traditional combination of lecture and discussion. To fully implement

the Commission's recommendations, more educators should assign group work, presentations and realistic projects. They should also utilize more technology to deliver their instruction. For instance, just a third use PowerPoint while more than half use old overhead technology.

In conclusion, public relations programs are beginning to implement the Commission's call for courses in visual communication and desktop publishing. However, more of these courses need to be designed to meet the specific educational needs of public relations students, to utilize more active learning techniques that make students partners in learning, and to provide the new technology needed to succeed in today's public relations practice.

Future research on the Commission's report as it relates to graphic design courses should investigate differences in the use of new technology by the size of programs and differences in use of active learning methods by computer lab availability.

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