

Bright Lights, Big Problem

An Active Learning Approach to Crisis Communication

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ABSTRACT

Public relations textbooks offer a variety of crisis management theories, cases, tips and techniques [Barton (1993), Center and Jackson (1995), Fearn-Banks (2002), Guth and Marsh (2000), Hendrix (2001), Ledingham and Bruning (2000), Newsom, Turk, Kruckeberg (2000), Wilcox, Ault, Agee, Cameron (2000)]. Crisis management is traditionally taught using methods that examine the effectiveness of past experiences, such as case study and rhetorical analysis. Crisis training in the professional world, however, involves experience. Crisis training is important [Birch (1994), Center and Jackson (1995), Cipalla (1993), Collingwood (1997), Guillebeau (1989)]. Organizations train management and public relations practitioners by having them role-play an encounter with aggressive "reporters," videotaping it, and critiquing the results. Bringing that model into the classroom provides students with an experiential opportunity to learn the complexity of crisis management. This paper illustrates such a method.

Literature Review

New approaches to teaching have become increasingly important. An increasingly open, global economy requires – absolutely requires – that all of us be better educated, more skilled, more adaptable, and more capable of working collaboratively. We must change the ways we teach and learn (William E. Brock (1993).

Richlin and Cox underscore the importance of matching technique with subject matter. Current trends in college teaching have resulted in increasing complexity in the ways that professors and students communicate with each other. As a consequence, professors have more ways available to facilitate learning, although more variables to consider when planning to teach (1994, p. 1).

Judy Turk (1991) tied the need for effective teaching to the public relations classroom: "Good public relations teaching also requires the development and use of appropriate, effective teaching skills, and identifying which teaching approach might work best in which classroom settings or with which material to be covered (p. 1).

Larissa Grunig (1990) argued for a "transformed perspective" in public relations education. Both the content of the courses we teach and the climate of our classrooms should foster students' understanding of what exists, what is possible and what is ideal (p. 2).

James Grunig (1989) noted that the design of an educational program is critical to the practitioner's ability to "perform in a sophisticated and professional manner" (p. 14).

Engaging students in the learning process moves them beyond simple mastery of skills: "[They must] engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (Bonwell and Eison, 1991, p. iii).

This becomes increasingly important as the student progresses. Upper division courses move to less-directive teaching methods that prepare

students for greater degrees of self-direction. "They] will increasingly employ such methods as student decision-making, collaborative learning, and independent projects, and faculty will shift from coaches to facilitators as students become more capable of directing their own work" (Grow, 1990, p. 62).

During the process of learning, students pass through states of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [Karron G. Lewis in Russell (1991)]. "[T]he student starts to learn with fairly passive experiences and becomes more personally involved as the continuum moves outward" [Russell (1991) p. 100]. This emphasizes the importance of active learning.

A variety of techniques are included under active learning. Using the framework of Chickering, Gamson and Barsi (1989), for example, Lubbers and Goryca (1996) cite ten practices of active learning in which students can be engaged: presenting in class; summarizing similarities and differences in topic areas; sharing outside experiences of class topics; undertaking independent study; challenging ideas presented in class or readings; analyzing concrete situations; using simulations, role plays or labs; inviting students to suggest course activities and materials; working with students to arrange outside experiences related to the course; involving students in faculty research (p. 20). Russell (1991) cites techniques enumerated by Lewis including direct experience, recall of experience, in-class (lab) experience, simulations, films/tapes, lecture examples, lecture analogies and descriptions, text reading, model critiques, paper and project proposals, model building exercises, field work (including internships), projects, case studies, discussions, logs, journals and brainstorming (p. 103). To these, Drummond (1998) adds the use of opinion "rounds" and peer teaching. Jensen and Davidson

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(1997) discuss the "power" of active learning: "Part of loosening control [inherent in lectures] is understanding that students can learn in many different ways ... [even] from each other" (p. 103). Service

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learning, a form of active learning that combines the "real world" experience of community service with in-class assignments, has also grown in popularity (Taylor, 2000; Louella Benson-Garcia, date unknown; Corbett and Kendall, 1999). In a recent survey of PRSA Educators Academy members, Benson-Garcia found nearly 75% of respondents used service learning as an important classroom tool. In a study of economics faculty, Benzing and Christ found that nearly half felt students learn best when "they are actively engaged in or out of class [through] participation, active learning, cooperative learning, student involvement, and by doing" (1997, p. 185-6). Chickering and Gamson (1991) point out: "Students do not learn much just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers" (p. 66).

Good teachers "stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over" [Boyer (1990) p. 24].

The Crisis Unit

The unit on crisis management presented here was part of the Leadership in Public Relations course. It would work well in a case study or campaign class, or as a one-credit free-standing special topics class. It was composed of the following class sessions:

1. CRISIS THEORY

This class was a traditional lecture format that included discussion. Students received a handbook prepared by their professor containing a step-by-step guide to dealing with a crisis before, during and after its occurrence. In addition, students were assigned readings that were how-to [Barton (1993)], critical [Blyskal and Blyskal (1985)], and ethical [Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995)].

Using case examples, the process and rationale for crisis planning, management and recovery were presented. The ensuing discussion focused on ethical handling of the cases presented. Every decision made in subsequent classes came back to the question of ethics. This focus in the first class of the unit was intentional. It should be noted here that

the first unit in the leadership course was on ethics, and each unit began with a discussion of the ethics of the area to be discussed in that unit. As L. Grunig (1990) explained, the "power of the first example" in a course or, in this case, a unit, is critical (p. 9).

At the end of the first class, the students were divided into three groups, each of which was assigned a crisis situation for which they were to develop a response. Each fictional situation "occurred" on campus, and each included different legal and ethical considerations.

2. GUEST SPEAKERS

The directors of University Relations and of Affirmative Action (also a lawyer) came as a team to discuss from their very different perspectives on how crises on campus are handled. They used case examples and engaged in a powerful and fascinating discussion. It was a unique opportunity for students to experience the internal tension involved in handling a crisis as the lawyer and the public relations practitioner negotiated the outcome of the discussion.

The guests received copies of the project scenarios prior to class. Following their presentations, they answered questions, giving students the opportunity for expert counsel on handling their assigned scenarios. This experience provided the "insider knowledge" so critical to making reasoned decisions in a crisis as well as insight into the "real world" process of managing a crisis in a complex organization.

3. DEVELOP CRISIS PLAN

This class was a lab during which students were to begin working with their team to develop a rough draft of how they intended to handle the situation. Each case contained a series of preliminary questions for them to answer before they began working on the practical component, the news conference. The professor acted as a consultant, answering questions and giving guidance upon request.

4. CRISIS TRAINING

A public relations practitioner known for his crisis management skills did an intense media training session with the students during this class. He talked with them about everything from word choice and body language, to clothing and make-up. He trained them in the importance of choosing, reiterating and staying on message. He took them through a drill to help them learn how to bridge from the situation to the message and involved them in role playing. He received a copy of their cases prior to the class, so he also answered questions they had about them. This session was yet another opportunity to bring the theory to life.

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5. CONFERENCE PLANNING

During this lab experience, the professor acted as consultant while the three groups met to organize their news conferences. Each team determined who would play which role: spokesperson, experts, etc. Using their readings, they were to decide what do, justify their decisions on paper, and plan:

- *Time and location* – For class purposes, a common location in Student Center was used. On paper, however, they had to choose where they would hold this news conference and justify their selection.
- *Collateral materials needed* – media kits, news releases, etc.
- *Spokesperson and, if necessary, any experts*
- *Media to be invited and the method of inviting them*
- *Refreshments*
- *University information*
- *Key messages*
- *Talking points*
- *Media training of any people involved*
- *Other details specific to their case*

6. NEWS CONFERENCE

This class was planned in conjunction with the Broadcast News Reporting and Broadcast News Gathering classes. Both had copies of the crisis situations. The News Reporting professor prepared her students to be, in her words, “feisty reporters,” ready to ask difficult questions and work to get the information they needed. The News Gathering professor brought his team of camerapersons who set up the lights, wired the podium with microphones, and recorded the session. Each group had 10 minutes to prepare the stage and 15 minutes to conduct the news conference. One student in each group was in charge of media hospitality. He/she made sure reporters received the group’s printed materials, and was responsible for arranging refreshments (provided by a university grant). The professor was present to observe before and during the conference, but would not give counsel after the first taping began; the students were on their own.

7. Critique

Following the taping, the professor viewed the videos and sent a copy to the guests from the preparatory classes. She also examined the collateral materials and provided a written analysis based on the following criteria derived from the students’ readings and the guests’ presentations:

- *level of spokesperson*
- *choice of experts*
- *dress*

- *body language*
- *attitude*
- *eye contact*
- *courtesy and respect for reporters*
- *opening of conference*
- *expression of sympathy*
- *acceptance of responsibility*
- *collateral materials*
- *use of background information*
- *messages*
- *answers*
- *avoidance of conjecture*
- *control of conference*
- *handling of potentially actionable material (legal)*
- *handling of personal information*
- *use of bridging (stayed on message)*
- *use of language (positive as opposed to negative)*
- *willingness to obtain additional information for reporters*

Two of the guests returned to class to give a critique of the videos. The class began with the students’ evaluation of their tapes; then the practitioners gave affirming yet highly critical evaluations. Students heard what they had done well and where they had created potential problems. The practitioners explained the potential cost of each error, and answered student questions, which now came from the profound experience of bright light pressure. At the end of the class, they received the professor’s written critique and grade, and were encouraged to discuss the feedback with her.

The questions asked during this class were very different from ones in earlier classes. The students understood from a new perspective the importance of every word, hand gesture and pause. In viewing the videos, they saw how biting their lip, clutching the podium, and hesitating before an answer made

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In viewing the videos, students experienced how a moment’s slip in control opened a door of aggressive questioning and caused them to lose control of the conference. They also saw that they were able to recover quickly and refocus the questioning.

them appear like they were hiding something. They experienced how a moment’s slip in control opened a door of aggressive questioning and caused them to lose control of the conference. They also saw that they were able to recover quickly and refocus the questioning. It was an amazing experience.

This unit illustrates how a variety of teaching methods can help students learn to deal with a real world situation. It required higher-level thinking in the gathering, synthesizing and re-packaging of information under pressure.

The Grade

The grade for this unit was based on the following:

- *Individual Criteria* – consistent, active participation in team sessions (timesheet self-report; peer critique sheet) and regular journal entries showing reflection on the process.
- *Group Criteria* – quality of the presentation and collateral materials, based on the criteria noted above.

Student Evaluation

Because this was a unit in a course, exact numerical evaluations for the unit alone are not available. Student satisfaction was reflected, however, in the overall course evaluations, which were greater than four on a five-point scale in all criteria, and in specific comments made about the crisis workshop on their course evaluations and in their journals.

In addition to important student outcomes, there were also positive department and college outcomes. The practitioners who participated spoke well of the experience both on and off campus. The Telecommunications and Journalism Departments were in different buildings, and this format facilitated interaction between the two disciplines, resulting in new relationships.

Conclusion

This unit illustrates how a variety teaching methods can help students learn to deal with a "real world" situation. It started with the traditional lecture and text reading methods, but quickly went moved into active learning techniques. It incorporated class discussion, small group/team work, role playing, case study, professional mentorship, coaching, journaling, and brainstorming. It required higher-level thinking in the gathering, synthesizing and repackaging of information under pressure, and in reflecting on the experience.

Most importantly, it brought theory to life. As one student wrote in his journal: "I learned a lot from the news conference experience. I mean, we could talk about it in class and try to imagine what it's like, but until you're thrown in front of the cameras and reporters, you can't anticipate what it's really like."

This paper reinforces the effectiveness of the use of multiple teaching methods in the classroom. It underscores the effectiveness of active learning and presents a creative format that combines traditional and nontraditional methods. It also introduces a unique method of involving public relations practitioners with students in the classroom, thereby strengthening the connection between the academic and professional worlds.

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