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Can every class be a Twitter chat?: Cross-institutional collaboration and experiential learning in the social media classroom

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Abstract

Using the framework of experiential learning theory to guide assignment creation, instructors of social media strategy classes at three university campuses conducted cross-institutional Twitter chats with students. By creating topical case studies using the online storytelling platform Storify and discussing them during the chats, students applied course theories and concepts, built professional networks, honed professional skills, and broadened understanding of strategic communication using new tools in unique digital cultures. Qualitative textual analysis of the 2,088 tweets coupled with instructors' teaching observations revealed the assignments fostered conditions for an experiential learning process, which students enjoyed. Best practices for teaching using similar assignments in public relations and social media are offered.

Keywords: experiential learning theory, public relations education, social media, Twitter, Storify

The rising popularity of social media tools and technologies is readily apparent, as 73% of online adults use some type of social networking site, with 42% of them engaging with multiple platforms (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Although younger populations are typically seen as the primary social media users (Henderson & Bowley, 2010), middle-aged and older adults are also jumping on the social media bandwagon to learn more about products, stay in touch with family and friends, and gain timely information during disasters or crises (Creighton, 2010; Fraustino, Liu, & Jin, 2012). Clearly, social media tools are now popular channels for seeking and sharing information.

As the key communicators tasked with building relationships with publics, public relations (PR) practitioners need to respond to today's dynamic, shifting communication environment (Wright & Hinson, 2010; 2014), particularly via social media engagement. A study by Booz & Co and Buddy Media found 88% of companies use social media for PR efforts (Falkow, 2011). Young practitioners increasingly must develop social media skills to be competitive on the job market and successful in the workplace, and such training can start in the PR classroom. By teaching PR and strategic communication students the core elements of public relations practice, which includes social media skills and expertise (Wright & Hinson, 2014), instructors invest in the future of the profession (Zitron, 2014).

The purpose of this study, then, is to explore innovative ways to teach students social media skills. Through cross-institutional partnerships, three distinct social media strategy and writing classes created case studies of relevant PR topics and shared those cases with one another via monthly Twitter chats. Cases and chats allowed for student work across institutions that provided insights into effective manners of engaging students in social media learning, concept retention, networking, and skills development.

Literature Review

This review examines social media use, both in the PR practice and the PR classroom. It then turns to a discussion of experiential learning theory in general and related to Twitter in particular.

Social Media in Public Relations Practice

Using social media has increasingly become a part of public relations practitioners' day-to-day work. Kim and Johnson (2012) found PR practitioners must be social media savvy to compete effectively in the working environment. Demand for communicators with social media skills reached a milestone in spring 2013, with PR specialists being second-most sought after for social media knowledge and expertise (Lombardi, 2013). For many of these practitioners, the array of available social media tools have widened the parameters of communication options that allow them to reach out to and engage with key publics (Kim & Johnson, 2012). However, these tools continue to shift and change. An analysis of job site listings by Indeed.com found that employer interest in specific social media platform expertise has skyrocketed, with jobs requesting Instagram skills growing by a striking 644%, Vine increasing 154%, and Twitter up 44% between 2012-2013 (Stone, 2013).

Why are social media skills a high demand in public relations? According to Avery et al. (2010), both social media and public relations roles strive toward *building relationships*. "Social media are inherently interactive, communicative, and social. These innate characteristics are not commonly associated with marketing or advertising. Some herald social media as bringing public relations full circle to its original foundation of building relationships" (Avery et al., 2010, p. 337). Social media help shift the organization-public relationship from one-way information dissemination to two-way engagement and dialogue (Creighton, 2010; Sweetser, 2010), which to publics is more personally relevant and similar to an interpersonal relationship versus a business transaction (Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser, 2010; Yang & Lim, 2009).

Social media require PR professionals to rethink and modify how they approach relationships (Kim & Johnson, 2012). Practitioners must relinquish some elements of (perceived) control to target audiences in efforts to allow feedback and participation (Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Solis and Breakenridge (2009) claimed social media alter "the entire media landscape, placing the power of influence in the hands of regular people with expertise, opinions, and the drive and passion to share those opinions" (p. 1). Thus, because the relationship is collaborative, PR professionals need familiarity with a "push-pull" strategy, where information is simultaneously both pushed out to and pulled from key publics (Creighton, 2010, p. 198). Several studies have demonstrated push-pull is difficult for many practitioners and that professionals are slow to adopt social media tools despite recognizing their value (Jo & Kim, 2003; Kelleher, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007); indeed, less than half are comfortable with the large variety of tools available to them (Lariscy et al., 2009). All hope is not lost, however. Wright and Hinson's (2010) two-year longitudinal survey of PR practitioners found 85% reported social media have changed their organizations' communication, and 99% claimed to have interacted with some aspect of social media.

Social Media in the Classroom

Even though students' self-perceived identity as digital natives may be accurate in their personal lives, they often need help translating those skills to their academic and professional work (Melton & Hicks, 2011). Using social media in the classroom, especially for projects that require understanding of how an organization might strategically engage with social media, can improve student collaboration, understanding of strategy, technical skills, and networking (Melton & Hicks, 2011). With an overload of digital information readily available, the ability to process messages quickly and clearly is a skill worth incorporating into the classroom environment (Locker & Kienzler, 2012). In the social media context, both instructor credibility and social identification on the part of the student with a commenter can impact both educational effects and cognitive learning (Carr et al., 2013).

Computer-mediated communication can enhance peer-led discussion of concepts, including theoretical ideas (Robertson & Lee, 2007). A study on student creation and use of audio podcasts and videos showed using multimedia allowed students to supplement and enhance their learning, including increased comprehension of the material (Parson, Reddy, Wood, & Senior, 2009). Social media based interaction, whether teacher-student or student-student, can encourage rich dialogue and critical discussion of topics (Moody, 2010).

Using social media in the classroom also allows students to explore important ideas in new ways while enhancing digital literacy. Students find material more compelling when they are producing as much as consuming (Searls, 2000). Using creativity to interact and create allows students to improve both self-reflection on the material and social inclusion in the classroom (Purg, 2012). It is important that students engage critically with material. Asking questions, especially of social media content, helps students understand how material relates to broader social, political, and economic forces (Buckingham, 2006; Purg, 2012).

Experiential Learning Theory

Such hands-on engagement is embraced by experiential learning perspectives. Several decades ago, Kolb (1984) introduced experiential learning theory (ELT) based on dominant early learning theorists such as Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). ELT unpacks learning as a cyclical and integrative process of thought and experience. As Kolb (1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) described, ELT integrates six foundational propositions about learning: (1) it is process as opposed to outcomes; (2) it involves relearning; (3) it entails resolving conflicts between opposite ways of being oriented to the world, requiring reflection on differences and disagreements; (4) it is holistic and adaptive; (5) interdependent actions between the learner and the environment prompt it; and (6) it is the act of constructing and reconstructing knowledge. Learning, according to Kolb (1984) is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41).

Specifically, Kolb (1984; see also Baker et al., 2002) conceived of two ways of grasping and two ways of transforming experience: Learners grasp experience through *concrete experience* (apprehension) and *abstract conceptualization* (comprehension), and they transform experience through *reflective observation* (intension) and *active experimenta-*

tion (extension). Therefore, experiential learning facilitates students' creation of knowledge through a spiraling learning cycle of experiencing, reflecting, observing, and acting – all within the context of the learning environment and topic. Students engage in prompted actions (concrete experiences) that they internalize and apply to theory and ideas (abstract conceptualization), which can create a foundation for students to interpret others' and revisit their own actions (reflective observation), spawning new implications for next actions tested in subsequent situations (active experimentation). All this grasping and transforming of experience is then applied to new experiences, abstractions, thoughts, and actions, and the cycle repeats.

To maximize knowledge creation according to ELT, students must choose from sets of opposing learning abilities to resolve the learning situation topic/ problem (Kolb, 1984; Baker et al., 2002). For example, to grasp experiences, some students may tend to intake information primarily through tangible sensations, while others gravitate toward symbolic representations or logical reasoning. Likewise, to transform experience, some may prefer to dive in headfirst and engage in action immediately, whereas others are more comfortable first watching others' actions and reflecting on the observed results. The literature shows that creating a holistic learning environment wherein students can enter the cycle at any stage and circle through it recursively using an assortment of learning abilities can increase learning by students with various personality types, backgrounds, and learning styles (e.g., Cheney, 2001; Healey & Jenkens, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, 2009).

Experiential Learning in Communication and Public Relations

As Atif (2013) observed, undergraduates in today's media-rich environment have been raised alongside technologies. Recently, the World Wide Web celebrated its 25th year of existence (Wagstaff, 2014) – a birthday milestone many current undergraduates have yet to achieve for themselves. Growing up with continual access to social and digital technologies, today's students are likely to favor technology-enhanced social contexts versus face-to-face contact. In spite of this, however, Atif (2013) asserted that the undergraduate classroom has been slow to incorporate digital ways of learning. Public relations scholars might be at the forefront of such endeavors, however, with social media academics such as Freberg (Loren, 2013) and Sweetser (Sweetser, 2008), among many others, openly using popular social media platforms in their teaching.

Public relations scholarship has begun to show the link between instructors' efforts to teach social media and the potential value of experiential learning. For example, using a pre-post test survey design with a final sample of 25 students, Wilson (2012) found that fostering participatory learning in the context of client-based projects led to increases in some aspects of students' reported critical-thinking and problem-solving proficiencies. Further, the value of experiential approaches seems generally supported by instructors and potential employers alike. For instance, interviews with educational service providers and focus groups with those holding accreditation (APR) by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) found providers and practitioners in South Africa assessed experiential learning techniques as highly important in preparing students for public relations work roles (Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011).

Similarly, in the U.S., Todd (2009) found PR practitioners requesting graduates to have hands-on skills and experience with digital technologies. Particularly interesting in the context of that and the current study, Anderson and Swenson (2013) conducted a Twitter chat with social media industry leaders as a method for obtaining data, uncovering that the responding PR pros believed there was "no substitute for hands-on practice" using various digital technologies (p. 3). As one of their participants, Social Media Manager Matt LaCasse, said: "Frankly, the only way to train them is to have them do it" (Anderson & Swenson, 2013, p. 3).

Twitter and Experiential Learning

Twitter is an excellent platform for putting experiential learning in the public relations classroom into motion. Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking site on which users can post brief, conversational statements of 140 characters or fewer (Twitter, n.d.). Users may "follow" other users, causing those users' tweets to show up in a streaming feed, allowing for a variety of ways to consume and share information. Users may interact through, for example, "retweeting" (posting another user's tweet verbatim for one's own followers to see), "favoriting" (starring another's tweet to indicate approval), "@replying" (replying directly to another's tweet), "@mentioning" (tagging another user in one's tweet), "direct messaging (DM)" (sending a private tweet to another, including pictures and/or links in tweets, and joining conversations through using "hashtags" (the symbol "#" proceeded by a word or combination of words that can then be used as a search mechanism to find specific content among billions of tweets).

Twitter is intended to be, and is perceived most positively as, a personal and conversational medium (Twitter, n.d.). It is a self-proclaimed "global town square," that is, "a public place to hear the latest news, exchange ideas and connect with people all in real time" (Wickre, 2013, para. 3). This idea has important links to experiential learning, particularly the notion that experiential learning can occur not only through gaining physical experiences (e.g., using a new digital platform) but also via *conversation* (e.g., engaging with others on topics of potential divisiveness). In their book on the relationship between experiential learning and conversation in business, Baker and colleagues (2002) discussed how the act of engaging in dialogue with people with potential conflicting opinions can create social experiences that spur people to see the world differently, creating knowledge. Thus, it follows that if students are provided the opportunity to engage with classmates and non-classmates on Twitter about controversial, socially relevant, and/or new professionally pertinent topics, they stand to enhance knowledge through contemplating opinion differences – all in addition to gaining hands-on experience navigating and contributing to a popular social media platform with a limited character allowance and a unique digital culture of its own.

Thus, considering all above, we pose these overarching research questions:

RQ1: How, if at all, do students apply public relations concepts via interactive discussion on Twitter?

RQ2: How, if at all, does creating case studies using Storify and presenting them in cross-institutional Twitter chats facilitate an experiential learning environment for students?

RQ3: What best teaching practices can be gleaned from this study?

Method

Qualitative textual analysis of tweets coupled with field observation allowed researchers to understand how students can use social media to enhance classroom experiences and the plausibility/impact of experiential learning opportunities (Berg, 2009).

Procedure

Three upper-level social media course instructors, one at the main campus of a flagship mid-Atlantic public research university, a second at a satellite campus of the same university, and a third at a southern public research university collaborated to create assignments that would tap into the theoretical constructs and goals discussed above. Collaboration was deemed key to ensure students were exposed to viewpoints from a variety of belief-systems and backgrounds, as conversation has proven helpful for experiential learning (Baker et al., 2002). The team devised three related assignments: (1) social media bootcamp, (2) Storify new media case studies, and (3) cross-institutional Twitter chats. Data and results pertaining to the first item will appear elsewhere in a forthcoming book chapter; items two and three are expanded upon below.

First, all students were given an initial assignment to create a case study via the online storytelling tool Storify (https://storify.com/), which enables users to collect and embed evidence from a variety of online sources (e.g., blogs, Google searches, YouTube, Twitter, online news media websites) in their "stories." Students were invited to choose topics of interest, but they were required to discuss a time when an organization used (or failed to use) social media to effectively (or ineffectively) engage with publics. Giving students responsibility to find their own real-world examples of organizational social media use of relevance, and requiring students to package their information using an unfamiliar social media platform, was meant to further experiential learning goals.

Each student or pair of students first presented his/her social media case study in a traditional in-class oral presentation at his/her home institution, including in-person question-and-answer sessions. Then, students who had presented the case study in the month leading up to one of the three scheduled Twitter chats shared their cases with chat attendees for discussion based on questions posed by the students themselves. Twitter chats are real-time conversations participants engage in by tweeting using a pre-determined hashtag. In many cases, including ours, a moderator poses questions and participants tweet answers (Cooper, 2013). Student questions were distributed in the chat by the instructor-moderator. Appendix A shows some case study topic examples, organized by story year.

Data Collection

Data included transcripts of all tweets from three Twitter chats, collected using the assignment's designated hashtag, as well as teaching observations from each of the three instructors.

Twitter chats. Three Twitter chats occurred, each about four weeks apart, on different days and times in order to reach the broadest number of student participants. The instructors organized and moderated each session. In addition to the three instructors present, 49 students participated in the first chat, 53 in the second, and 44 in the third. Twitter chat transcripts contained 824 tweets from the first chat, 604 from the second, and 660 from the third, for a total of 2,088 tweets for analysis. Students were required to participate in at least one Twitter chat over the course of the semester; they could also participate in other chats for extra credit.

Teaching observations. All three instructors gathered observations about experiences teaching the course, moderating the Twitter chats, and helping students enhance knowledge/skills. The three instructor-researchers engaged in regular and extensive peer debriefing throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, with a constant comparative method to identify and draw out themes from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Line by line coding of Twitter transcripts brought about emergent themes, which were then merged into categories through axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In addition to grounded codes, themes and concepts were drawn from a priori codes in relation to the literature and research questions. Attention was paid to anomalies or negative cases (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The researchers met frequently to discuss coding, ensure consistency, and revise codes and categories as necessary. Peer debriefing allowed for identifying and removing researcher bias (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which increased credibility while providing a space for ideas and assumptions about the data to be challenged and discussed among the research team (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008).

Results

Applying Course Concepts

The first research question asked how, if at all, students applied public relations concepts via Twitter chat discussions. Several overarching class concepts were used as discussion points by the students to make connections between the Storify cases and their understanding of public relations strategy. The most resonant themes emerging from chats included professionalism, influence/perceptions of the media, insights on crisis communication, social media campaigns, and public relations best practices.

Professionalism. Exemplifying this theme, the Storify case on Justine Sacco's inappropriate tweet that prompted her employer to terminate her employment brought up discussion in the Twitter chat focusing on what constitutes professionalism. Students emphasized maintaining integrity, especially as a representative of an organization:

> Student A: The fact that her profession was in the comm field & she decided that was appropriate to write...that's baffling. #NOTOK
>
> Student B: She's a communications professional. Shes expected to act like a "professional". She was wrong for tweeting that.#tweetfilter
>
> Student C: Her tweet was extremely offensive and as a PR professional, she should have known better. She asked for that.

Influence/perceptions of the media. Twitter chat discussions also featured the power of mass media to influence students both personally and professionally. As one student tweeted, "...most of us are public relations majors so we should understand how media can affect us." Other students discussed their concern about what the media constitutes as newsworthy:

> Student A: It's honestly sad that the media puts so much emphasis on celebrities rather than things that affect us directly.

> Student B: I couldn't agree more. It's sad how the media shifts attention.

Students also engaged in a conversation surrounding the media's role in publicity:

> Student A: We learned in my reputation management that bad publicity can really take away your most loyal customers.
>
> Student B: Not all publicity is good publicity, if your company enters a crisis and can't resolve it, your rep will be damaged.
>
> Student C: If all publicity were good publicity, there would be a lot less jobs related to PR. It would all be too easy.

Insights about crisis communication. Many Storify cases focused on crises; thus, Twitter chat discussions often focused on what constitutes effective crisis management. In one example, students talked about Carnival's crisis response to a malfunctioning cruise ship:

> Student A: Even though the response was not immediate, I think it was smart for them to gather all info and then address the public.
>
> Student B: Carnival was very effective in relaying their messages. They kept nothing secret and kept the media up to date.

Students also discussed what they would have done if tasked with Carnival's crisis response:

> Student A: I would have handled the crisis much sooner than they had and focus on ensuring frequent cruisers that it won't happen again.
>
> Student B: I think I would have made a formal apology IMMEDIATELY, and then used all outlets to say how we were fixing the problem.
>
> Student C: In addition to the actions they took, I would have also outlined how the co. would avoid the issue in the future.

Another perspective of crisis management was brought up in a discussion of the Columbia Mall shooting, which involved several key players including local police and mall staff. Students talked about the importance of providing up-to-date information to community members:

> Student A: Both parties need to be sensitive to the families/situation. The involved party should try to tell the truth and be objective.
>
> Student B: The already involved party should act objectively and in the best interest of the victims.

Launching successful social media campaigns. Many of the cases focused on social media campaign strategies. As one student tweeted, "definitely social media presence is the key to success these days." Others agreed and discussed how social media can help with relationship management. For example, students talked about Esurance's Save 30 campaign:

> Student A: New media platforms can serve any client with the right spin, like the #EsuranceSave30 superbowl campaign.
>
> Student B: It just gives them the idea of using SM platforms to interact w/ customers in fun ways that generate awareness.
>
> Student C: It provides an exemplary basis of effective hashtag usage, and show credibility in its campaign by airing the winner on TV.

Downsides of social media engagement were also topics of conversation, especially how organizations relinquish control to publics. As one student tweeted, “You never know what the publics will post. There are some crazy people using SM.” Another student agreed, and tweeted, “Ppl love to interact thru SM so its attention grabbing, but people do not know boundaries in a lot of cases.” Students were then asked to comment on the positives and negatives of a social media campaign. One student tweeted, “Positives: garners more attention, campaign spreads quickly and easily, international usage. Negatives: outlet for neg responses.”

General discussion of public relations best practices. Finally, some valuable insights were given by students in terms of PR best practices that practitioners should consider:

> Student A: One thing advertisers and/or sponsors should know...know your audience!
>
> Student B: Honesty is the best policy. No need to sugar coat things. We’re all adults!
>
> Student C: Your audience should always be taken into consideration when introducing a new PR campaign!
>
> Student D: In order to be seen, you must be heard! PR 101!

Facilitating Experiential Learning

The second research question sought to determine how, if at all, Twitter chats could facilitate student experiential learning. Data showed the chat exhibited experiential learning characteristics, particularly themes of learning as a process, constructing and reconstructing knowledge, and learning through conversation. Students also appreciated networking opportunities and demonstrated learning advancements using Twitter as a professional communication tool.

Learning as a process. Many observations indicated students’ knowledge gain through experiential learning. Two examples can highlight the chat’s ability to accommodate different learning styles and to engage in the full ELT cycle, respectively. First, by examining students’ Twitter handles in relation to frequency of tweeting throughout the chat, it was evident that some users began tweeting and interacting shortly after introducing themselves while others did not engage with chat content until after a few case discussions. This is perhaps reflective of different styles for grasping and transforming experiences. That is, the former group could constitute those who tend to learn through *concrete experience*, by jumping in and doing, whereas the latter group might be those who prefer *abstract conceptualization*, such as by carefully observing and learning from others before reflecting and testing.

Second, in several instances, it appeared that students realized they had neglected to use the hashtag that would allow others to see them as participating in the conversation, and followed up by sending an identical tweet that used the hashtag. We observed this in our experiences debriefing with students as well as looking at students’ full Twitter feeds. This might reflect evidence of a cycling learning process whereby the student likely acted by tweeting (concrete experience), thought about what he/she knew about Twitter chats from readings and course content (abstract conceptualization), saw what others were doing and how that fit with what they did (reflective observation), and revised behavior to fit new knowledge (experimentation). This is one practical example of students cycling through the experiential learning model. However, results showed students demonstrated experiential learning principles not only in hands-on, tool-learning capacities but also related to PR concepts (noted above) and by leveraging exposure to others' ideas to cultivate deeper thinking about pressing social issues, as the next examples will show.

Exposure to different people and ideas/Constructing and reconstructing knowledge. Students often engaged in side conversations with each other, replying to students rather than solely to the moderator. For example, one student asked her own question on a case study about celebrities announcing homosexuality via social media. She inquired: "Q18 follow up: I wonder how people, especially celebrities, dealt with being in the closet even 20 years ago?" Another student replied to her, noting "Idk much about it but celebs would protect each other, ex Rock Hudson was a famous actor in the 60's and was gay." This reflected experiential learning both as a function of the first student being prompted by a case study to think about and question her knowledge base as well as knowledge gain through questioning existing thoughts and opinions.

Some students more overtly challenged others' opinions. For example, in a robust, multi-tweet, multi-participant conversation surrounding a data breach at Target stores, a few interactions respectfully butted heads:

> Student A: I know I didn't want to shop at target until last month cause I was too scared!
>
> Student B: I know this won't stop me from shopping at target in the future :)
>
> Student C: Target did a good job keeping the public informed but I think there should have been more than 10% discount.
>
> Student E: I was hesitant about returning to Target but I couldn't stay away! ;)
>
> Student F: I don't think they handled it well because they only offered a discount but people were still left unprotected.
>
> Student H: … I also think they could of given the customers a bigger discount :)
>
> Student I: Thats a good idea, but how much would you give out? XD
>
> Student G: [retweet Student I]: $1000 :)

This example indicates the chat offered opportunities for people from different classrooms and of varying opinions to interact surrounding a wide assortment of PR issues. As the interaction above highlighted, one such popular topic was crisis communication. And these interactions, in turn, resulted in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge as students reflected on their own opinions in relation to others'.

Networking opportunities. Students appreciated the networking opportunities afforded by the Twitter chat's learning-by-doing nature. Rather than merely thinking about the uses and benefits of Twitter, as might be done in a conventional classroom setting, students engaged in tweeting with others, exposing them to new people and ideas. For example, one student in the first chat thought about the benefits obtained from participation, among them "Positives...hmm, we met you guys at [another school] #networking." Across both chats, others echoed this sentiment. For example, one participant said "As always, enjoyed the #[Chat]! Nice to communicate with other students on topics.. #ShareTheKnowledge #Network" and another tweeted, "Thanks for having us! so much fun as always #[Other School] have a great day!! #naptime." Some even viewed the events as a mechanism for "healthy competition" of displaying case study work and engaging in insightful discussions: "[Other School] y'all better BRING IT next time (; #justkidding #healthycompetition." And networking opportunities extended beyond university peers. One student proudly told her instructor that PETA reached out to her as a result of accessing her animal-rights case study on Storify via her tweet.

Developing knowledge of Twitter as a professional tool. In setting up the chats and debriefing afterward with students, the instructors were interested to find most students had never participated in a Twitter chat prior, and several had never used Twitter for any purpose. During the chats, students asked questions of instructors via Twitter (e.g., "@[Instructor] what was the website we used for the twitter chat again??") and interacted with other students both online and offline to gain proficiency using the medium. Students expressed pride in their developing skills and seemed thankful for the opportunity to develop them in a welcoming environment. One student proclaimed "My first tweet ever! #yayme #ifeelold." Another announced, "as my first twitter chat it was [sic] been fun and interesting! Thank you!"

Student response to experiential learning. Experiential learning principles in action spurred positive student reception. For example, one tweeted "Every class should be a Twitter Chat!" Another wanted to know "Can we do this every class?" Yet another offered "I think these twitter chats should take place every class #JustSaying." Another student tweeting from an instructor's classroom noted "Fun way to learn. Haha #iamrightnexttoyou," and yet another exclaimed "whoever came up with twitter chats is a GENIUS. Great tactic to get students to do their work and participate." In instructors' debriefings, students expressed enthusiasm for using course assignments to gain experience navigating the quick pace of Twitter chats. Some students expressed this in the chat as well, for example: "This was so fast paced but still great discussion. I look forward to the next one!" Students also liked that the chat allowed them to meet not only other institutions' students but also instructors: "...honestly this is a fun way to learn and communicate with students and teachers!," one tweeted. As the final chat came to a close, one student joked: "Time to regret not paying attention in the rest of my classes this semester b/c I spent so much time Tweeting for PR." Finally, many students enjoyed experiencing the gratification of a successful chat. One student excitedly took and tweeted a screenshot of the chat hashtag being listed as a top ten trending local hashtag on Twitter.

Best Teaching Practices

The final research question aimed to determine what, if any, best teaching practices could be gleaned from the study. Insights from all three instructors are compiled here and discussed without individual attribution, as the instructors reached consensus. Namely, themes related to balancing content, moderating the chat, providing carryover into the classroom, and specifics for assignment setup and grading are discussed next.

Balancing content and conversation flow. The Twitter chats were an hour each, not long to discuss multiple cases with 50+ students. Further, time was reserved at the beginning for students to introduce themselves to one another to encourage networking and at the end for wrap up. We discussed nine cases in the first chat, 12 in the second, and 30 in the third. The decrease in discussion time for each case was clearly noticeable from the first to second chats. The moderator had to move quickly, oftentimes just as the conversation had become deeper, and students would continue to talk about previous cases, sometimes causing confusion about which comments were related to which cases. Some students mentioned they felt rushed, so instructors told them they could choose to discuss the case(s) they found most interesting for as long as they wished.

By the third chat, instructors moved to dispersing the case links in groups clustered by topic area, shifting the discussion from a case-by-case examination to using the cases as examples of larger discussion topics (e.g., crisis communication, products and product launches, celebrity endorsements). This seemed an effective way to increase time spent on topics while engaging many cases. However, students were also enthusiastic about the chance to have their classwork discussed with a wider audience. Even students who had chosen identical case study topics (e.g., three students chose the Lay's Do Us a Flavor campaign) found others had different perspectives on the same campaign, which they compared and contrasted to their own constructions and outlooks. Ensuring all students have a chance to showcase their work is key.

Moderating the chat. Moderating a large and content-full Twitter chat is a complicated balancing act. The tendency to over-moderate can be strong, similar to temptation in a more traditional classroom to ask a question and then immediately provide an answer. In the Twitter chats, providing students with time to think and engage allowed them peer interaction, increasing benefits of experiential learning. The cross-institutional collaboration increased access to relevant concepts and new opinions.

Instructors not tasked with moderating a particular chat (in this case, each chat had one instructor designated as moderator) should find ways to engage with the students. One instructor took on the role of asking deeper questions of specific students to encourage them to bring additional insights to the discussion. This helped keep the chat from remaining at surface level, as students knew they might be faced with follow-up questions. Other times, a non-moderating instructor would provide positive feedback to comments or would retweet questions to help students stay on topic. Having two additional instructors participate in the chat helped manage the volume of content, answer questions, and engage all of the students more fully. Further, because conversations were occurring on Twitter, instructors could be slightly more relaxed with students than in a classroom setting, making jokes or side comments. Students noticed and appreciated this virtual closeness, both in the chat and in the classroom afterward.

Carryover into the classroom. Questioning where other instructors or students placed emphasis and why can be helpful for students and instructors. Some terms or connections students made had been discussed on one campus but not another. So, each class was able to debrief separately after the chat, sharing new ideas with their classmates and determining where these ideas fit in the existing course structure. Relatedly, keeping track of the chat concepts or topics was useful for instructors later in the semester. Witnessing what students were interested in discussing with each other provided examples instructors could use in future class sessions to strengthen connections across course material.

Assignment setup and grading. Not all students had the same level of comfort or ease with using Twitter. Thus, instructors devoted time and resources in class, giving links to articles about how to participate in Twitter chats and discussing expectations. However, this could be expanded by perhaps hosting a brief mock chat in class. It is also helpful to allow students to assist one another during the chat. We chose chat times so that at least one occurred during each institution's class session, allowing students to participate while surrounded by their peers both off and online.

All three instructors used the same rubrics for grading both the Storify case study and the Twitter chat. The Twitter chat rubric, however, was quite basic, as this was a pilot effort. The rubric simply asked whether the student had done a number of things: tweeted two unique comments, retweeted comments from two other participants, and made one @reply to another person. While this made grading simple, it also assigned the same grade to a student who tweeted "yes!" in reply to a question and a student who tweeted a thoughtful response using course concepts. Future rubric iterations could distribute points that reward content substance as well as technical skills. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that students can use merely 140 characters per tweet and thus do not have the ability to engage as fully as they might in a several-minute presentation with oral follow-up Q & A.

Finally, reflection is an important part of the experiential learning process. We required students to complete a reflection paper early in the assignment process. In the future, writing brief reflection papers on each chat might help students better adjust their experimentation.

Discussion

Overall, this preliminary investigation of how Twitter chats might be effective teaching tools in the social media classroom yielded several noteworthy insights. For example, through creating case studies featuring PR and strategic social media concepts, students applied course materials to the "real world." Sharing those case studies via the fast-paced and interactive Twitter-sphere with students in similar classes at different campuses allowed students to experience and engage with an assortment of viewpoints on essential concepts. In this study, students discussed items ranging from PR employee professionalism to crisis communication to campaign strategy.

Further, the Twitter chats appeared to foster conditions for experiential learning as described by Baker et al. (2002). Students demonstrated they were engaging in learning as a process rather than outcomes, and they showed evidence of constructing and reconstructing knowledge through environmental interaction. Findings indicate Twitter chats may provide potential for individuals with different learning styles to cycle effectively through the learning process to gain knowledge. Students also expressed appreciation for this innovative learning environment, which included engagement with course material, networking with other students and instructors, and new professional familiarity with a popular social media platform. The chats also encouraged students to develop networking skills as they interacted with others and learned how to make connections via Twitter. Thus, the students were able to experience relationship building from various levels, learning in real-time why social media platforms can be conversational and relationship-focused (Avery et al., 2010).

In addition, communication scholars have found benefits of instructors using social media not only inside but also outside the classroom. For example, based on their survey of public relations students, Waters and Bortree (2011) asserted that by creating and maintaining social networking profiles, instructors humanize themselves. That is,"by demonstrating a more personal side, professors can reduce the nervousness many students feel when approaching authoritative figures" (p. 3). Our experiences corroborate this notion. Each instructor noted a shift in classroom climate, and the instructor-student and student-student relationships seemed deeper and more personal following participation in the Twitter chats.

Purg (2012) noted the act of creating increases self-reflection and social inclusion, which the instructors observed in their students throughout these assignments. Using platforms such as Storify and Twitter and comparing their work to that of their peers, not just in their own classroom but at other universities, gave students new insight into self-expression, storytelling, diversity, and community via social media. Searls (2000) noted that producing and consuming information together makes content more compelling and interactive; students were excited to share their Storify cases with one another and to receive feedback on Twitter. Melton and Hicks (2012) discussed the idea that using social media improves collaboration, and with this study, we found collaboration also improves social media understanding and connections to the underlying PR knowledge base.

Limitations and Conclusion

As with all studies, there are benefits and constraints. The cross-institutional, social media-based nature of this study provided specific insights and best practices for teaching similar courses, but there are limitations. For example, although the instructors were able to pick up on issues mentioned by students through the chats and general class discussion, additional student data could provide other insights. Future research on this and similar assignments should collect quantitative and qualitative data surrounding student experiences, perhaps by administering an anonymous survey and/or conducting interviews and/or focus groups. Further, these data are qualitative and highly contextualized. Findings here might not transfer to other settings, instructors, and students.

Overall, this project was a useful teaching tool. Partnering with instructors at multiple higher education institutions may enable professional development opportunities for both instructors and students. Course-sponsored Twitter chats in particular may provide potential for those of different learning styles to cycle through the experiential learning process to create and recreate knowledge around theoretical and practical public relations concepts.

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Appendix A. Examples of Storify New Media Case Study Titles and Topics

Storify Case Study Title	*Storify Case Study Topic*
BP Oil Spill	Fallout from the oil spill; still an issue for BP years later (2010)
Te'oing	Manti Te'o's fake girlfriend scandal (2012)
McDonald's Twitter Campaign was a #McFail	Using #McDStories for negative stories of McDonald's (2012)
How to Take a Disaster and Make	Carnival Cruise Line's ship Triumph had an engine fire
The Greatest Twitter Fail	Tweet about not getting AIDS in Africa due to race (2013)
Batkid Saves Gotham City	Fulfilling the wish of 5-year-old Miles Scott, aka Batkid
Six Californias?	Campaign to split the state into six separate states (2013)
Guess What Day it is?	Analysis of Geico's Hump Day camel commercial (2013)
Literally Totes the Most Deranged Srat Email, Like, Ever!	Viral email from the Social Chair of University of Maryland's Delta Gamma Sorority (2013)
Target Credit Card Breach 2013	How Target handled theft of customer credit card details
Cheerios	Cheerios commercial features interracial couple, garners
SeaWorld: Their PR Transition	Impact of *Blackfish* (documentary) on SeaWorld PR (2013)
Lay's "Do Us a Flavor"	Launch of annual Lay's Do Us a Flavor campaign (2014)
#Esurancesave30 Super Bowl	Launch of Esurance's Save30 Super Bowl campaign (2014)
Shooting at the Mall in Columbia	Shooting at the Mall in Columbia, Maryland and Twitter response of Howard County Police Department (2014)
#AerieReal Campaign: No More Photoshop!	Aerie clothing store's lack of photo retouching (2014)
University of Maryland Data	The computer security attack exposing records of University
Seth Rogen: More than Just a Comedian	Seth Rogen's testimony before the Senate about Alzheimer's, and then discussion on Twitter about the lack of support (2014)
Sochi Causes MAJOR PR Prob-	Coca-Cola's backlash from LGBT activist groups for not
Ellen DeGeneres Takes Over	Ellen as Oscars host, selfie tweet heard 'round the world

Note: Students selected their own topics of interest.

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In their own words: A thematic analysis of students' comments about their writing skills in mass communication programs

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Abstract

This study explored student self-perceptions of writing skills in mass communication programs at thirteen public state universities in the Mid-Atlantic region. Responses to three open-ended questions revealed heavy student concern with their basic skills, a desire for extensive faculty contact and feedback, and for many respondents, an immaturity or naiveté regarding professional standards. This study addresses implications for faculty members who wish better understand their students in order to devise more effective writing instruction.

Keywords: writing, , writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, thematic analysis

Skilled writing has always been a key requirement in the public relations profession. As employers continue to demand skilled writers, university programs have responded with coursework preparing students for the professional workplace. Yet, many media employers find recent graduates lacking in fundamental writing skills. In a 2008 survey of 120 diverse American corporations, Cole, Hembroff and Corner (2009) found significant dissatisfaction with the writing performance of entry-level public relations practitioners. The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) identified skills in writing, critical thinking and problem-solving as major deficiencies in entry-level practitioners. According to Lingwall (2011), college media writing instructors have reported similar deficiencies in students.

Recent literature offers an unflattering view of writing skills among the millennial generation of college students. Manzo (2008) wrote that only small portions of middle and high school students showed proficiency in writing – use of proper spelling and grammar, along with more sophisticated skills needed to write essays or explain complex information. Scholars including Turner (2009) established links between students' increasing use of technology and a general decline in writing skills. Bauerlin (2008) has referred to millennial students as "The Dumbest Generation," believing they are immersed in technology that "dumbs down" their writing skills. A 2006 survey of college professors by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* confirms a belief that college writing skills are declining. Similarly, in Lingwall's 2011 study, mass communication professors reported teaching many new students only moderately proficient in writing. Reports focused on deficiencies in critical thinking, paragraph and sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, and proofing and editing.

While there is general consensus that

media writing skills are weak among current students, a solution to the problem has not yet been offered. To craft new instructional approaches to improve writing skills, it is important to uncover the ways in which our students perceive their own media writing skills and the task of media writing. This study explores what our students think and feel about their writing skills.

Review of Literature

To better understand the task of writing from the student's perspective, four areas of writing perception have been offered as measurement constructs: writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, writing approaches, and social media writing competence.

Theoretical Approaches

Two theoretical frames have served as foundations of research in JMC studies of student's perceptions of writing: writing apprehension (Daly & Miller, 1975; Riffe & Stacks, 1988) and writing self-efficacy (Collins & Bissell 2002). Writing apprehension focuses on fear of writing tasks. Writing self-efficacy focuses on self -perceptions of ability in writing. A third area of theoretical interest is based upon writing approaches (Lavelle & Guarino, 2003) and focuses on the perceived use of writing strategies. Together, these three theoretical areas of writing self-perceptions fit the traditional tripartite attitude dimensions (Ajzen, 1989). Writing apprehension refers to an affective domain set of perceptions – feelings about writing. Writing self-efficacy concerns self-perceptions of performance ability in writing, or the behavioral (conative) dimension. Writing approaches reveal the cognitive domain of self-perception, or how we perceive our strategies as writers.

Writing apprehension. Daly and Miller (1975) identified writing apprehension as a deterrent to acquisition of writing skills. Beginning in 1988, Riffe and Stacks expanded Daly's work into journalism education, focusing on writing apprehension as a multidimensional construct that included seven factors of writing apprehension in journalism and mass communication students: general affect, blank-page paralysis, mechanical skill competence, career and essential skills, evaluation apprehension, task avoidance, and facts versus ideas (1992).

Writing self-efficacy. Collins and Bissell (2002) defined writing self-efficacy as one's perception of his or her ability and achievement in writing. This construct grew out of the theoretical framework developed by Bandura (1986) focusing on the influence of self-perception and attitudes in learning efficiency. Researchers including Pajares (2003) explored dimensions of perceptions of writing ability across college and K-12 learning environments. In a range of studies, writing self-efficacy was correlated with writing outcomes, writing anxiety and writing apprehension, grade goals, depth of processing, and expected outcomes. Identified as a motivation construct, writing self-efficacy was also used as a pretest of performance. Collins and Bissell later adopted this construct to measure writing self-efficacy of journalism and mass communication students.

Writing approaches. Lavelle and Guarino (2003) constructed a measurement of college writers' perceptions of the processes they undergo to complete a writing task. This theoretical framework focuses on a relationship between the student's intentions during writing and choice of writing strategies, which subsequently affect writing outcomes. All writers are said to rely upon strategies, which vary between novice and expert writers. Strategies are linked to beliefs about writing and writing ability. These researchers make a basic distinction between "deep" writing (making new meaning and insight) and "surface" writing (largely reproductive and reiterative).

In the same study, Lavelle and Guarino (2003) identified five factors of student writing approaches: elaborationist (active engagement of audience), low self-efficacy (based on self-doubt), reflective revision (to remake or rebuild one's thinking), spontaneous/impulsive (surface strategy), and procedural writing (adherence to rules). Elaborative and reflective revision are identified as representing a deep approach to writing. Lavelle and Guarino concluded that instruction should create learning environments emphasizing a deep approach to writing.

Theoretical Summary

This study explores three levels of self-perception of writing. The cognitive dimension is represented by approaches to writing. Approaches to writing refer to the perceived use of cognitive strategies to accomplish writing tasks. Deep writers use sophisticated cognitive strategies. Surface writers employ either no strategies or impulsive approaches. The affective dimension is represented in our study by writing apprehension, a generalized fear of writing. This fear is marked by task avoidance, feeling lost, and a fear of evaluation. The important behavioral dimension of self-perceptions of writing is represented by writing self-efficacy, or self-perception of writing performance ability.

Method

This study sought to discover what students believe has most helped their progress as writers, what students believe has most hindered their progress as writers, and what students wish their instructors knew about their writing skills in their communication program.

During September 2012, researchers administered a paper survey questionnaire to 860 anonymous students enrolled in communication courses at thirteen comprehensive state universities in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The instrument contained three sections with check-off and Likert-type items to determine demographic information and student self-perceptions of writing skills. The last part of the survey asked three open-ended questions: (1) In your opinion, what in your communication program has most helped your progress as a writer? Please explain. (2) In your opinion, what in your communication program has most hindered your progress as a writer? Please explain. (3) What is the one thing that you wish your communication instructors knew about your writing skills? The three open-ended questions formed the basis of this qualitative narrative analysis.

This study employed thematic narrative analysis to examine the answers respondents provided to the three open-ended questions. As described in Reismann (2008), thematic analysis is used to derive thematic categories from narratives provided by respondents.

The survey was completed by 860 students with nearly a 100 percent response rate. Noted demographics included university, year in college, major, concentration, gender, and ethnicity. Among respondents, 41% (n = 352) were male and 57% (n = 490) were female. Regarding class standing, 33% (n = 284) were freshmen, 28% (n = 240) were sophomores, 23% (n = 197) were juniors, and 15.5% (n = 134) were seniors. Regarding major, 68% (n = 588) indicated they were communication majors, and 30% (n = 260) said they were non-majors. Regarding concentration within the major, 23% (n = 198) indicated broadcast media. Fully 15% of students (n = 127) indicated public relations, while 3.5% (n = 30) indicated advertising. Finally, 7.5% (n = 64) of participants indicated journalism. A total of 6% (n = 53) indicated general communication. A total of 45% of respondents (n = 388) did not indicate a concentration.

Respondents were somewhat diverse in terms of their ethnic backgrounds. A total of 74% (n = 635) indicated white, 13.5% (n = 114) indicated African-American, and 5% (n = 44) indicated two or more races. Another 1.5% (n = 12) indicated Asian, and another 2% (n = 15) indicated American Indian. A total of 2% of respondents (n = 18) indicated Hispanic or Latino. Another 1% (n = 9) declined to state their ethnicity, and four students indicated "other."

Results

Out of the pool of 860 returned surveys, 397 came from communication majors who wrote coherent answers to at least one of the three open-ended questions. A total of 145 respondents indicated they were male, 241 indicated they were female, and 11 did not indicate gender. Regarding ethnicity, 299 students indicated they were white, 69 indicated they were African-American, nine Hispanic, four Asian, seven indicated two or more races, and nine declined to answer.

Thematic analysis revealed a clear set of answer categories for each of the three questions:

RQ 1: In your opinion, what in your communication program has most helped your progress as a writer? Please explain.

Coursework. When considering what in their communication program had helped their progress as a writer, 120 students listed helpful courses they had taken in mass communication (for example, media writing, public relations writing, news writing, news reporting, and broadcast writing) and other disciplines, including the basic English composition course.

The Writing Process. Forty-six students discussed helpful measures related to the writing process such as feedback from instructor or peers, opportunity to submit drafts, peer review, and learning from the draft process. Seventy-nine students listed instructional or pedagogical strategies as most helpful to their progress (review of grammar, spelling and punctuation; coverage of AP style, explanation of media formats, and various writing assignments. Four indicated currency and relevance of assignments most helped their progress.

Immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards. Ten students provided responses indicating immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards (also addressed below).

Experience with student media or outside organizations: Finally, seven students said that experience with student media or outside organizations had most helped their progress as writers.

RQ 2: In your opinion, what in your communication program has most hindered your progress as a writer? Please explain.

Coursework. Here, 32 students listed courses they had taken in mass communication and other disciplines. Most of these complaints focused on particular instructors and pedagogical styles (poor lecturing, lack of organization, or too much busy work). Other complaints centered on a lack of sufficient writing courses at their institution.

The writing process. Thirty students indicated that helpful measures connected to the writing process (feedback, opportunity to submit drafts, or peer review) were missing or lacking in their coursework. Forty-four students found fault in instructional practices they encountered, such as not enough writing assignments, assignments graded without comments and feedback, and lack of AP style instruction. Another eight students commented that technology (including social media) had hindered their progress as a writer.

Immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards. Notably, 35 students indicated a level of immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards in their responses (see below).

Work overload. Ten more students said they were overloaded with writing assignments in one or more classes.

Self-efficacy. Finally, seventeen students indicated serious concerns with their own self-efficacy or ability as writers (see below).

RQ 3: What is the one thing that you wish your communication instructors knew about your writing skills?

Skills deficits. Here, 149 students wrote about their own skills deficits (grammar, mechanics, punctuation, organization) or other cognitive problems they suffered (inability to find a topic, organize thoughts, or stick with assignment).

The writing process. Another 31 students focused on the desire for more process-oriented writing instruction (instructor feedback, ability to submit drafts, peer review).

Immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards. Fifty-two students provided responses that indicated immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards (see below).

Self-efficacy. Forty-seven students indicated serious concerns with their own self-efficacy and ability as writers (see below).

Instructional/pedagogical help. Forty-five students wrote that they desired various types of instructional/pedagogical help (see below).

Work overload. Finally, 14 students said they were overloaded with writing assignments in one or more classes.

The researchers found one difference between students based on gender. Females tended to express stronger desire for process-related support (instructor feedback, opportunity to submit drafts, peer review). In addition, females tended to make comments focused on self-efficacy (self-criticism of writing ability). The researchers discovered no real differences by class standing or ethnicity.

Discussion

A clear and honest cry for help and individualized attention rings through many of the 397 student responses in this survey. Across all groups, students indicated a strong desire for instructor support and detailed, honest feedback supporting the writing process. Selected student comments follow.

Instructor Support

"Writing comes hard for many and easy for very few," wrote one respondent. "If you give a hard project within writting (sic.) make sure you try to work with students, encourage them, understand that it is hard to write, and do more writing activities."

Another student wrote, "Some people went to terrible high schools or had challenges. They are not stupid but they may need individual attention. Don't waste class time teaching everyone how a comma works."

A third student wrote, "I wish my writing would be looked at more critically. I always get papers back saying what worked well, I just wish I got more criticism so I know how to improve." Yet another respondent said he/she disliked "Professors who provide no feedback, only a grade... you never learn what could be improved, so your skills as a whole never improve."

Detailed, Honest Feedback

- "I had a writing prof and she would grade my research papers but barely give any feedback, and when I'd ask her about it, she'd give half-assed (sic.) answers."
- "I wish we could submit a draft and then a final copy. Constructive criticism would be helpful in writing process also (sic.)."
- "I would love more feedback on my writing... that would help me a lot!"
- "When a professor gives my essay back and grades it harshly. I need criticism; that is how I will learn."
- "I wish my professors would correct me more in what I'm not doing right and then show me what would be better."
- "The lack of consistent review from the professor or peers has hindered writing in a sense. I think it would be a great idea to have more student-teacher conference days working on a paper."
- "The one thing about the communication program is they don't go over in details (sic.) whats (sic.) wrong with your paper or ways to improve it. With the small amount of papers given, the students do not get a chance to improve their writing skills because there was no feedback. There needs to be a time where the instructors could help revise."
- "That marks on a paper don't help me understand which errors I made, that actual feedback is needed."
- "Writing takes time. As a student I need feedback; what do I do well, what do I do poorly?"
- "I wish they would give us more feedback because they don't tell us anything that we do right, just what we do wrong."
- "The only thing I can think of is that I have not had as much specific feedback on my writing as I would like."
- "The lack of coherent feedback from the instructor throughout the term... Too often are (sic.) papers never said why they are good or bad (sic.), just graded."
- "It's hard to only hand in one hard copy of a paper when you don't know if everything is correct and what the professor wanted."
- "The thing that has hindered my writing in my program is my professors only expect a final copy. It would be nice if we could get their opinions throughout the process almost like an editor. I wish they knew my need for more feedback on my writing."

Another student indicated that she needed help with developing creative techniques. "The creative process is what I struggle with most. I wish the instructors would help us in some way to learn different techniques to become more creative."

Review of Basic Skills

Many students indicated they needed significant review of basic skills, including grammar, punctuation, spelling, organization, and in finding/choosing topics. One student wrote that "probably just going over the basics again and again" had helped him progress as a writer. "You can have all the great ideas in the world, but if you don't master the basics, it's not going to matter, because you won't be able to express those ideas in writing."

Another respondent wrote, "I never had a good writing class in high school, therefore my grammer (sic.), punctuation, and organization are not as strong as they should be. Although I feel I can write profound pieces I still lack in fundamentals."

Other students echoed similar sentiments:

- "I wish they understood more that I am still learning, rather than saying I should already know."
- "One thing I wish my instructors knew is how many different ways I've learned grammar skills through junior high, high school, and college. I wish there was a mutual way of teaching grammar and reviewing it so that the things I've learned would all be consistent."
- "Even though I hate doing it, the part that's helped me the most is reviewing the basics. It's a pain sometimes, but can also be a great reminder."
- "Learning how to more clearly convey ideas. I tend to start with a million ideas, and the comm program has given me ways to streamline them."
- "It is hard to write down your thoughts in an organized fasion (sic.). Even if we understand the theories/ concepts or topic matter our writing may not always be the best reflection of what we know."
- "The AP Stylebook... it seems like a great guide to get quick help when I write. I want to make sure I'm correct."
- "That I have a hard time with grammer (sic.)."
- "I'm a bad speller."
- "I struggle with writer's block and wonder if there is a way to counter it."
- "I struggle with spelling and grammer (sic.) at times."
- "I reread and edit my work what seems like a thousand times, which in the end doesn't help me because I tend to skip over small spelling and grammer (sic.) issues."
- "Grammar isn't my strong suite (sic.)."
- "That I have a hard time understanding all the punuation (sic.). Comma's (sic.) semicolens (sic.). Instructors need to explain things better."
- "The one thing I wish my communication instructors knew about the writing challenges I face would be my bad grammer (sic.) and spelling."
- "I can't spell a lot of words correctly without looking them up."
- "I wish they know (sic.) that I have issues with commas, semi colons (sic.), modifiers, and thesis statements. I usually end up getting it, but writing often intimidates me – even though I enjoy it so much."

Faculty Encouragement

A number of other students indicated that strong connections with encouraging faculty who maintained high standards had most helped them progress as writers. "I think the strong instruction from the teachers, their personal connection, and willingness to help the students succeed really helps me progress as a writer because I know that they believe in me and are willing to help me, so therefore I believe in myself," wrote one respondent. Another said, "In the intermediate reporting class, my professor was very strict but she was also very helpful with my writing. She gave me excellent feedback and encouraged me to be creative."

Other students echoed similar sentiments:

- "I had a professor in my advanced composition class who really seemed to care about my writing skills and affected them in a positive way."
- "Having teachers you feel comfortable working with, many kids are more willing to ask for help."
- "The ability to contact each professor one on one without being afraid to ask questions."
- "I need to be motivated, talked to, have my writing edited often. It makes me want to write more."

Noting the problems that occur when instructor apathy is present, one student said, "Many times I feel the instructor gives us busy work; i.e., he or she is just as bored as I am about the assignment. The writing process becomes frustrating because I feel like the instructor doesn't care about what I am writing, if they read my writing at all..."

Low Self-Efficacy and Lack of Confidence

In their responses, a number of other students indicated low writing self-efficacy and lack of confidence in their skills. The first group of comments appeared to express a futility in attempting to improve their writing skills. "I need more understanding of the fact that I'm not a good writer," wrote one student. "I wish they knew I am not a very strong writer," wrote another. A third wrote that she wished her instructor knew "that everyone is not a gifted writer. There are some people that try that just don't get it."

Some students criticized themselves as writers. "I can beat myself up over writing," wrote one. "I'm my own worst critic," wrote another. "So, I always want my reading to sound good and I also want my audience to enjoy what I'm writing." A third student noted, "I wish they knew that writing isn't for everyone. I try my hardest on writing assignments, they just never look as good on the paper as they did in my head."

Several students expressed the great personal stress they felt as a result of their shortcomings. "The pressure to perform well can be overwhelming and can deminish (sic.) my self-esteem to the point of a nervous breakdown," said one student. Another student noted, "I tend to break down when I'm confused or don't really understand grammer (sic.), punctuation, and organization."

Others said that instructor judgments of their writing damaged their self-image. "I wish my instructors knew that judging my writing makes me a poor writer," one wrote. Another respondent added, "Their judgment on my writing makes me hate writing."

Still other respondents expressed tentativeness and uncertainty about their writing skills. "I am unsure of my work so it comes out bad in the end," said one student. Another added, "The main challenge I face is writer's block. I am always too cautious of my ideas as I write."

Immaturity/Naiveté Regarding Professional Practices

A considerable number of students expressed immaturity/naiveté regarding professional media practices in their responses. These responses appeared to be self-centered in nature. Some students expressed the desire to write only about topics and in styles that were personally interesting to them. In particular, students said they disliked:

- "Being given a topic instead of choosing my own."
- "Writing about something that is not an interest to me."
- "Having to write about topics that are extremely boring and uninteresting

leads me to hate writing."

This group commented about what most helped their progress as writers:

- "I believe giving me less restriction and more freedom in writing helped me find my opinions and develop my writing style."
- "Writing about things I know about. Writing about things such as social media, movies, music, TV shows, plays, and networking."
- "The opportunity to be able to write on a topic I feel strongly about. For example, if I was given a topic about gossip entertainment, then it would be easier for me because I am interested in that topic."
- "When I am given the opportunity to write about what I am passionate about."
- "When I am writing I like to be excited about the topic. If I am not passionately invested in the topic it is difficult to want to do well."

Some of these students revealed their naiveté of the media professions, and the writing skills that employers require. "(Journalism) is the very opposite on how I write as a person and as a communication major (sic.)," he/she said. "I like to write in color and with vibrance; journalism writing is very concrete and monochrome."

One student even said he resented, "Placing a priority on writing... I don't see it as very important to my profession... I wish they knew how much I dislike it and how I don't see it as an important priority."

Another said she disliked "the constant stress to compile thoughts, ideas and facts so that it looks good on paper to do this multiple times throughout the semester." Two more students provided some misinformed advice to instructors: "No one really wants to write a paper on assigned topics. Let everyone pick what they want because it would be more freeing and relaxing for the writer," wrote one.

Another student wrote, "I believe learning about other writers and their progress most likely won't get me anywhere. Being a writer to me means being unique and able to express yourself in your own writing."

Others appeared to resent instructor criticism and chafed at the notion of professional standards. "I think I am fine with my writing it makes me comfortable it may not be the 'A' or 'B' paper I want but it's unique because it's mine," wrote one respondent. Other respondents indicated that the following had hindered their progress as writers:

- "Being told what to write."
- "The thought that you must write for a good grade within certain parameters."
- "The rules they set are stupid."
- "Focusing on grades are not nearly as important as writing about things students are passionate about... curriculum is too rigid."
- "Writing is more about perception about the message, not cracking down on traditional English grammar composition."
- "It seems that everything I've written had to be a certain number of pages. I believe what your (sic.) saying should be more important than how long it is."
- "Sometimes the writings can be too guidelined (sic.) and narrow in the needed outcome."
- "Guidelines. The paper is done when I feel it in my heart, not when it meets a certain quota."
- "In situations where creativity is in-

> volved the professor's opinion is usually the top priority in getting a good grade. They are more critical on things they disagree with or have a different idea for (sic.)."

A third group of students indicated they did not enjoy writing on deadline. "I hate writing to a set limit, just let me write," said one student. Another said, "I do not like to write under pressure." A third wrote, "I like to take my time with writing and that usually means I finish just before it's due." Finally, another student added, "It takes some time to write the papers they are looking for and sometimes we need more time."

Conclusion

Nearly half of all respondents in this study reported basic skill deficits. As a result, they desire and need new approaches from instructors -- approaches that many instructors have not had to emphasize before. Based on this qualitative narrative analysis, the researchers believe that many millennial students need: 1.) personal understanding along with extensive one-on-one help from their instructors. A "mass" approach will no longer suffice; 2.) focused feedback. They want to write drafts, make corrections and then resubmit their papers; 3.) intensive work on basic grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics.

These results clearly show that mass communication majors also need a focused reality check on how media professionals write and what media employers expect from them as writers. They need instruction that will help them mature into professional media writers who know what the field requires of them as writers as they begin their careers.

How are we as communication writing instructors addressing this set of issues? In a 2010 study of faculty perceptions of writing skills, Lingwall found that faculty were divided in their suggested approaches to addressing students' skill deficits. The first suggested approach was rigor-based: make the students toughen up or fail. However, this is not a realistic approach for most universities, and certainly not smaller programs. Very few programs have the luxury of culling out half the students who come to them. The second approach suggested by faculty members was to step back, provide support and remediation, with as much rigor as possible within their own institutions.

The bottom line is that many faculty members appear to be ignorant about the extent of students' skills deficits, and what students want to be done about it. We can no longer ignore the skills deficits of millennial students. As determined in Lingwall and Kuehn's 2013 study, nearly half of students expressed a need and desire for some remedial help with writing. We cannot afford to send them away. Therefore, help must be provided.

Lingwall and Kuehn (2013) found a high likelihood that instructors will find a divergent set of students in their writing classrooms. It is likely that instructors will teach a writing class with with some highly proficient writers, matched by almost an equal number of deficient writers. In this study, Lingwall and Kuehn found many students who said they needed remediation. Therefore, the researchers suggest using the Media Writing Self-Perception Scale (Lingwall and Kuehn, 2013) in conjunction with a Grammar Spelling Punctuation (GSP) test to provide the best study track for students. Use of the scale would enable instructors to give remediation to those who need it, and separate the proficient writers and allow them to track into advanced courses more quickly.

In remediating student writing skills,

it is essential to provide: (1) friendly accommodation, as students say they need approachable instructors; (2) a writing process that allows for continuous feedback through submission of drafts and focused instructor comments (this may require the use of graduate assistants or extra support staff); (3) complete coverage of all writing basics; (4) adequate one-on-one help to discuss self-efficacy issues with students who need it; and (5) down-to-earth, frank discussion of media professions and media professionalism. Students need to know they can attain the level of proficiency in writing that can grant them access into the media professions.

A recent review of the number of mass communication majors (Becker, 2013), shows a slight decline in students enrolled in journalism and mass communication programs. Could this be occurring because millennials do not accept the centrality of professional writing in the mass communication field? Could it also be that the need to learn professional writing makes the communication major less desirable to millennial students? While the answers to these questions will require more focused research, we must make sure that we open gateways to millennial students to help them see they can become mature communication professionals who enjoy writing and are comfortable with writing for the media professions.

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Integrating leadership in public relations education to develop future leaders

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Introduction

Organizations are operating in environments characterized by rapid change and increasing communication complexity. Thus, the development and education of communication leaders who are able to navigate and respond effectively and strategically in such dynamic environments has become equally critical for organizations. As a consequence, the implications for integrating leadership education, training, and development into public relations curriculum are profound. If we, as educators, can enhance both communication skills and leadership development for public relations majors, our graduates will be able to develop a sustainable competitive advantage and provide long-term value to organizations. Although the profession has advocated for leveraging the roles of public relations to a managerial and strategic level, the actual effort in building up the pipeline of future leaders in the profession is delayed. In higher education, there is a remarkable scarcity in designing, integrating, and delivering leadership in public relations teaching and education.

Therefore, this study uses a twin-survey to compare the perceptions of critical leadership dimensions in effective public relations practice between two groups (current leaders vs. future leaders). The purpose of this comparative research is trifold. First, it compares the level of agreement and/or disagreement on previously established leadership dimensions (Meng & Berger, 2013) between senior public relations executives (current leaders) and public relations majors (future leaders) in the U.S. to determine gaps. Second, identified perceptual gaps between the two groups may suggest potential pedagogical utility of leadership development in public relations education. Finally, the study aims to generate a discussion among public relations educators regarding how we can integrate leadership initiatives into public relations education.

Literature Review

Recently, the topic of public relations leadership has received significant attention. A plethora of research in leadership in public relations practice has focused on how public relations practitioners could apply different aspects/streams of leadership skills and behaviors (i.e., strategic decision making, ethical leadership, emotional leadership, and transformational leadership) to improve the effectiveness and organization-wide influence of public relations practice, with its roots in excellence research in public relations, managerial leadership research, and organizational communication studies (e.g., Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; Jin, 2010; Lee & Cheng, 2011; Meng & Berger, 2013; Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009).

Although existing research has investigated critical concepts related to public relations leadership, such as managerial role enactment, gender role, preferred leadership styles in crisis, effective behavioral factors, individual traits, and dimensions of excellent public relations leadership from the perspectives of public relations practitioners, only a few studies have addressed public relations majors' perceptions (Erzikova & Berger, 2011) or have considered revamping a core public relations course by integrating leadership training (Neff, 2002). Other issues, such as investigating the most important skills, sources to learn leadership skill sets, and areas where we can help students, are still unresolved. Therefore, this study extends previous research on public relations leadership and compares the perceptual gaps in leadership dimensions between two groups with the ultimate goal of discussing potential pedagogical implications. One leading research question is proposed:

RQ: Do significant differences exist between senior public relations practitioners and students majoring in public relations regarding their perceptions of critical dimensions of leadership in public relations?

Method

Research design and sample

This study used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit respondents from two separate populations: senior public relations executives (current leaders), and public relations students in an upper-division standing (future leaders). Specifically, an online twin-survey was conducted.

Survey instrument

The author adopted the same survey instrument from Meng and Berger's (2013) study although the wording of statements was geared toward the understanding from the students' point of view. The descriptive/demographic section was also revised to capture the student sample's features. A complete list of items is presented in Table 1. Student respondents were asked to rate on a 7-point scale how unimportant/important or helpful/unhelpful they found each of the items. The second part of the questionnaire gathered profile/demographic information.

Method of analysis

Two separate models were created, each with the respondent designation (current leaders vs. future leaders) being independent variables and each of the six separate leadership dimensions serving as the dependents (see Table 1). The one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used as there are multiple dependent variables correlated with each other.

Results

Respondent profiles

Overall, the "current leader" group consisted of 222 senior public relations executives nationwide. The recruitment process was accomplished through Heyman Associates, Inc, a senior PR executive search firm in New York City. The majority of online survey participants are key organizational informants by residing as senior leaders in communications in the organization. They have been working in the field of public relations/communication for more than 15 years (*n* = 170, 76.58%). The descriptive data indicated that 40.1% of the sample were male (n=89), and 59.9% were female (n=133). Most of them work for public corporations (n=83, 37.40%), private corporations (n=43, 19.40%), or public relations agencies (n=39, 17.60%). Most in the sample were Caucasians (89.2%), with African Americans and Hispanics comprising the next two largest groups (3.6% respectively).

The comparative "future leader" group consisted of 226 public relations majors holding an upper-division standing in the U.S., including 54 from the private university and 172 from two public universities. The final sample consists of 44 male students (19.5%) and 182 female students (80.5%). The average age of students was 21.86. For ethnic backgrounds, the largest category was Caucasians (91.2% or n = 206), followed by African Americans (4.9% or *n* = 11), Asians (2.2% or *n* = 5), and Hispanics (1.8% or n = 4). A large percentage of the surveyed students were seniors (72.1% or *n* = 163) and 27.9% were juniors (*n* = 63).

RQ: Perceptions of importance of leadership dimensions

Table 1 on the next page provides the results of all means difference testing. As depicted in the table, differences were found for all seven leadership dimensions (see Table 1). For each of the significant differences tests, additional means comparisons and item-level ANOVA tests were undertaken to understand the nature of the differences between the two groups. Since there are only two groups compared in all models, post hoc tests are not performed. Using Wilks's statistic, Wilks's Λ = .831, *F* (7, 440) = 12.74, p = .000, the only significant perceptual difference between the two groups existed on two of the seven leadership dimensions: team collaboration and communication knowledge management capability. Separate univariate ANOVAs were carried out as the follow-up tests on the outcome variables at the item-level. The results revealed that several more specific skills, behaviors, and qualities were found to be salient to public relations students. A breakdown of group differences at the dimension- and item-levels is presented in the following paragraphs.

1. The dimension of self-dynamics: No difference was identified at the dimension level.
    a. Students found being dependable ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .20; p = .02) and enlisting others in a shared vision ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .18; p = .03) more important;
    b. Students found being proactive ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = -.21; p = .01) and being able to provide a vision about PR value ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = -.19; p = .02) less important.
2. The dimension of team collaboration: Students found this dimension more important than did practitioners ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .76; p = .03).
    a. At the item-level, students found three items: to define PR strategies with team members ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .19; p = .02), to facilitate positive interdependence ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .26; p = .01), and to bring diverse groups together ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .24; p = .01) more important.
3. The dimension of ethical orientation: No difference was identified.
    a. However, students showed lower perceptions on two items: to correct erroneous communications promptly ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = -.17; p = .01) and to represent consistent behaviors ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = -.17; p = .02).
4. The dimension of relationship building: No difference was identified.
    a. At the item-level, students generally rated individual items higher than did practitioners except for one item: to mentor and help young professionals achieve success ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = -.43; p = .00);
    b. Students rated two items: to provide regular briefs about PR programs ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .49; p = .00) and to cultivate relationships with external publics ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}}$ = .25; p = .00) as very important, compared to practitioners.
5. The dimension of strategic decision-making capability: No difference was identified at the dimension level.
    a. At the item-level, practitioners found being a member of strategic decision-making teams more im-

Table 1

Summary of Means Comparisons at the Dimension- and Item-levels

	Dimension-Level/Item-Level Means (Standard Means)		Dimension-Level Multivariate/Univariate Results	
Leadership Dimensions/Items	Senior PR Executives ($n = 222$)	PR Majors ($n = 226$)	F Ratio	p^a
List of dimensions/measuring items				
Self-dynamics	68.14 (6.19)	67.72 (6.16)	.49	.483
Be dependable	6.35	6.55	5.55	**.019**
Be proactive	6.47	6.26	7.49	**.006**
Engage in decision-making	6.27	6.20	.69	.407
Act as a changing agent	6.16	6.08	.88	.348
Apply diverse strategies	5.69	5.72	.08	.779
Be forward looking	6.23	6.09	3.25	.072
Vision PR as a managerial function	5.85	5.85	.00	.985
Enlist others in shared vision	5.95	6.13	4.88	**.028**
Predict potential changes	6.40	6.35	.34	.56
Provide a vision about PR value	6.42	6.23	5.40	**.021**
Align PR goals with organization goals	6.35	6.26	1.30	.256
Team Collaboration	30.26 (6.05)	31.02 (6.20)	5.00	**.026**
Define PR strategies with members	6.13	6.32	5.76	**.017**
Develop a proactive team	6.35	6.39	.42	.519
Facilitate positive interdependence	5.79	6.05	8.02	**.005**
Bring diverse groups together	5.82	6.06	6.54	**.011**
Inspire other members	6.18	6.19	.00	.951
Ethical Orientation	31.92 (6.28)	31.92 (6.38)	.00	.996
Maintain professional standards	6.50	6.54	.39	.534
Integrate core values into actions	6.41	6.54	3.18	.075
Correct erroneous comm's promptly	6.55	6.38	6.43	**.012**
Represent consistent behaviors	6.46	6.29	5.36	**.021**
Understand cultural ethical differences	6.00	6.18	3.22	.074
Relationship Building	49.42 (6.18)	50.13 (6.27)	2.61	.107
Foster trust with organizational leaders	5.94	5.85	1.08	.299
Develop coalitions	6.61	6.45	5.23	**.023**
Mentor and help prof's achieve success	6.59	6.16	29.55	**.000**
Provide advice and counsel to executives	5.59	5.92	9.23	**.003**
Provide regular briefs about PR programs	5.58	6.07	25.91	**.000**
Cultivate relationship with ext. publics	6.24	6.49	10.28	**.001**
Foster trust with media representatives	6.45	6.61	5.32	**.022**
Understand the needs for key publics	6.43	6.59	5.13	**.024**

Table 1 Continued
Summary of Means Comparisons at the Dimension- and Item-levels

	Dimension-Level/Item-Level Means (Standard Means)		Dimension-Level Multivariate/Univariate Results	
Leadership Dimensions/Items	Senior PR Executives ($n = 222$)	PR Majors ($n = 226$)	F Ratio	p^a
List of dimensions/measuring items				
Strategic Decision-Making Capability	25.15 (6.29)	25.15 (6.29)	.00	.992
Interpret information from publics to organizational decision makers	6.17	6.28	1.75	.187
Know org's business and environment	6.27	6.35	1.02	.314
Know org's decision-making process	6.25	6.25	.000	1.00
Member of strat. decision-making teams	6.47	6.27	5.69	**.018**
Communication Knowledge Management	47.64 (5.96)	50.51 (6.31)	33.16	**.000**
Apply PR knowledge to crises	5.78	6.32	36.57	**.000**
Evaluate comm. programs to improve	6.02	6.30	11.57	**.001**
Obtain resources to support efforts	6.42	6.53	2.11	.147
Use media knowledge to comm. better	5.95	6.28	14.30	**.000**
Use new tech. to interact with publics	5.58	6.17	36.03	**.000**
Use research to develop strategies	6.00	6.16	3.47	.063
Use research to solve problems	6.04	6.39	20.28	**.000**
Convert knowledge about publics and policies into effective advocacy	5.86	6.36	30.99	**.000**
Supportive Organizational Culture	36.49 (6.08)	37.09 (6.18)	2.45	.118
Share a common reporting relationship	5.69	5.95	5.65	**.018**
Supports open communications	6.26	6.42	4.16	**.042**
Value public relations efforts	6.55	6.40	3.62	.058
Have access to organizational leaders	6.54	6.36	5.77	**.017**
Report directly to organizational leaders	5.98	5.92	.29	.589
Value and practice diversity	5.48	6.03	21.54	**.000**

Note. a. Significance in boldface.

portant ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .20$; p = .02).

6. The dimension of communication knowledge management capability: Students found this dimension more important than did practitioners ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = 2.87$; p = .00).
   a. Students generally gave all eight items higher ratings than did practitioners, and there are four items which have been perceived as very important among student respondents: to apply PR knowledge to crises ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .54$; p = .00), to use new technologies to interact with publics ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .59$; p = .00), to know how to use research to solve problems ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .35$; p = .00), and to convert knowledge about publics and policies into effective advocacy ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .50$; p = .00).
7. The dimension of organizational culture: No difference was found.

a. Students generally rated individual items higher than did practitioners except for one item: to have access to organizational leaders ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = -.18$; $p = .02$);
b. Students perceived three items significantly more helpful than did practitioners: to share a common reporting relationship ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .26$; $p = .02$), to support and enourage open communications ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .16$; $p = .04$), and to work in an organization that values and practices diversity ($\text{Mean}_{\text{diff.}} = .55$; $p = .00$).

In short, group differences found and depicted in Table 1 provide important information for understanding both dimension-level and item-level perceptual differences that may aid not only public relations students in building their own standards of effective leadership, but also aid public relations educators in revising and updating curriculum by integrating leadership training.

Conclusion

To improve understanding and provide learning experiences that will help public relations students develop leadership skill sets and enhance their opportunities to be successful in the increasingly competitive work environment, the significance of this study is trifold. First, the study seeks to assess leadership perceptions held by both senior practitioners and students in the upper-division regarding critical leadership dimensions. Second, this study compares the levels of agreement on various factors (public relations leadership dimensions) between the two groups that will help determine gaps and areas of potential enhancement. By including the perceptions of students, it can help us gain a sense of what public relations students believe to be important in the self-actualization process as future leaders, thereby providing perspective on whether we should focus on those aspects of their public relations education that will best position them. Finally, the study aims to provide recommendations for educators to prepare students for the increasingly competitive job market and provide public relations majors with a sustainable competitive advantage in a rapidly changing profession and information society.

Group differences and similarities in leadership perceptions found and depicted in Table 1 provide a general picture for understanding aspects that may aid public relations students in building their own leadership skill sets and sustainable competitive advantage. At the model level, the promising news is that the very basic desired leadership dimensions have not changed significantly if compared to senior public relations executives. At the individual item level, a closer inspection actually reflected the perceptual gaps on certain skills and qualities, which further reflect a potential opportunity for public relations educators engaging students in those relatively weak areas. Such results may be indicative that these behaviors and conditions are leadership qualities that are more obviously invaluable in the profession that public relations majors are not fully aware of. This finding is noteworthy and educators should continue their efforts in providing students with a competitive advantage by incorporating and addressing ethical considerations, proactive nature, and strategic decision making issues (Benn, Todd, & Pendleton, 2010; Neff, 2002).

Pedagogical Recommendations

The results yielded in this study offer some insights for public relations educators to teach, discuss, and assess leadership learning-related issues in undergraduate public relations education specific to today's marketplace environment. The results can be pedagogically used in many ways, including the following:

- As a leadership training situation checklist designed to summarize major leadership qualities, skills, behaviors, traits that have been valued by the profession and provide a foundation for discussing how to apply those leadership principles in each unique public relations or communication situation.
- As an assessment tool given either before and/or after the presentation of a core undergraduate public relations course, such as public relations planning and management, case studies, and crisis communication.
- As the basis for a leadership-related research assignment in which students research and write an analytical report regarding "real-world" situations that mirror the springboard's leadership situations/scenarios.
- As the basis for strategic planning and/or ethical and/or crisis role play assignment in which students roleplay and discuss the public relations scenarios and what leadership skills and/or behaviors should be applied.
- As a set of assessment metrics to be applied to relevant supervised public relations experience in helping students monitor, re-check, and revise their perceptions and behaviors about initiatives, leading roles, and effective communication.

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