

Implementation of Active Learning Techniques in an Undergraduate Public Relations Course: Comparing Individual Social Networks and Brand Communities

Corrie A. Wilder, Washington State University

This paper describes an in-class social network mapping activity that serves as an overview of social identity and social objects—the building blocks of a social network. Active learning techniques were used to introduce the concept of personal networks, brand communities, and the role of public relations professionals in fostering relationships. The social network mapping activity illustrated the application of the following theories: Travers and Milgram's (1969) "the small world problem," Tajfel's social identity theory (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and Granovetter's (1973) "strength of weak ties." It prompted students to consider which individuals are in their networks and how they are connected through unique social objects. Furthermore, they determined where audiences overlap and weaker network ties reside and related these connections to the development and nurturing of a brand community. Through active learning exercises that included quick-writes and manual social networking mapping, students visualized how various connections use social objects to create communities. They ultimately learned that messages spread further and faster when shared through weak ties that bridge otherwise unconnected communities.

Keywords: social network mapping, social objects, social identity, interactive learning, active learning, brand community, public relations coursework, undergraduate teaching

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“Social networks are . . . full of unexpected strands linking individuals seemingly far removed from one another in physical or social space” (Travers & Milgram, 1969, p. 426).

Made popular by the “six degrees of Kevin Bacon” trivia game measuring the number of degrees of separation between any actor or actress and the actor Kevin Bacon (Fass et al., 1996), the theory commonly known as “six degrees of separation” posits that any two people on the planet are within six connections of each other (Witkop, 2019). The original study, “The Small World Problem” (Travers & Milgram, 1969), shows us the grand, complex interconnectedness in our society.

To expand this concept from a random, connect-the-dots game to an analysis of the many ties that bind us and the communities formed around these ties, the author conducted an in-class activity comparing an individual social network to a brand community. Mapping and analyzing unique social networks teaches people where and how we are connected with one another. Relationships are an integral part of the public relations industry. When researchers and students expand on the idea of the individual social network and consider the broader social network of a brand or product, valuable insight is gained into the publics a company seeks to reach.

Literature Review

Social Identity and Social Objects

An individual’s sense of self relies on the other individuals in his/her circle. One’s desire to create and foster personal connections and to “belong to a particular community, and behave according to the established norms and values” (Martínez-López et al., 2015, p. 173) is at the core of social identification. The faintest sense of social connectedness, even with people that we classify as strangers, influences the adoption of others’ interests and goals as our own (Walton et al., 2012).

The central tenet of Tajfel's social identity theory is that groups are "a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 40). Social identity theory further suggests that individuals create ties that form social networks (communities) when they are similarly enthusiastic about something beyond themselves. The "social category membership" described by Tajfel is a community, inspired through conversation and sharing of some object, creating a human connection between two people. This "social object" (McCleod, 2008) can be anything—from archery to zombies—and is the reason we become part of any social network.

Social Networks and Social Network Mapping

A "network" is by definition a "structured pattern of relationships typified by reciprocal patterns of communication and exchange" (Stephenson, 1999, p. 7-41). To that end, a "social network" is a set of actors (or nodes) that may have relationships (or ties) with one another (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005).

Zhao et al. (2012) explored communities based upon the social objects that link their members. The results of their study suggest that the stronger the tie, the more commonalities there will be to connect the nodes with the ties. An individual and his best friend, therefore, likely share more common bonds than he and his manager.

Mapping social networks serves to visualize the seemingly invisible network of our relationships (Chan & Liebowitz, 2006) and illustrates the structure of our culture (Stephenson, 1999). How one relates and interacts with their diverse network of communities affects the way the member identifies with any single community (Heere et al., 2011). This social phenomenon can be defined through an individual and his/her personal network or, on a larger scale, an organization and the employees making up various departments and a brand and the communities interested in its product(s). A form of network mapping called "knowledge

mapping” (Chan & Liebowitz, 2006) is used in organizations to enhance collaborative learning outcomes or to match an individual with a department where his/her knowledge is most relevant.

Brand Communities

Just as individuals are driven by social objects to form a social network, members interact via social objects to develop brand communities (Zaglia, 2013). Seemingly disparate communities can emerge around an identical brand. According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), awareness of the “structured set of social relations” (p. 412) among members of a brand community expedites an organization’s ability to develop and cultivate deep consumer relationships.

Members participate in brand communities in a manner akin to participation in social networks, as the goal in both cases is to find people with similar interests and skills, to foster emotional support and encouragement, or, perhaps, to solve a problem. It can be argued that a social object or a brand that brings members together is at least as important as the link itself (Zhao et al., 2012) and that networks are strongest when everyone is playing a valuable role (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

The Strength of Weak Ties

From Austin’s theory of sovereignty to Malcolm Gladwell’s *Tipping Point*, we are conditioned to believe that we are lemmings, following a hierarchy centered on a single person of tremendous influence (Dewey, 1894; Gladwell, 2000). Indeed, extant studies suggest it is not necessarily the nodes within a network that help disseminate the most information at the greatest speed; rather, it is the properties of the network as a whole that make the difference (Granovetter, 1973; Watts, 2011). In his book, *Everything is Obvious**, Watts (2011) posited, “when influence is spread via some contagious process, the outcome depends far more on the overall structure of the network than on the properties of the

individuals who trigger it” (p. 96).

More than four decades ago, Granovetter (1973) suggested that “strong ties” are “positive and symmetric,” meaning that the relationship is supported by a combination of time, intimacy, and reciprocation of knowledge (p. 1,361). This conceptualization prompts us to consider those to whom we are “weakly tied” as members of social circles other than ours, although we are somewhat connected to these individuals through network overlaps. The bridges between individuals in different social circles (the “weak ties”) are the key to the spread of information because they have access to information different from that being disseminated in our immediate network and thus provide new social objects with which to connect.

Communication professionals tend to focus on leveraging strong ties; however, research shows that individuals linked via weak ties make up more cohesive communities that can spread a common message with greater speed, ease, and influence (Granovetter, 1973; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Watts, 2011; Wu et al., 2004).

Understanding where our friendship circles overlap and being aware of our extended network—i.e., individuals with whom we have weaker ties—can help generate new ideas and disseminate more knowledge. In the words of Walker Smith (2012), “Weak ties are not bad; they’re just weak” (para. 17). Weak ties exist with acquaintances with whom we can potentially network.

Method

Participants

Among the 11 participants in the activity described in this work are four male and seven female junior- and senior-level college students enrolled in a face-to-face 300-level communications course taught over a six-week summer session at a large public university in Washington State.

About the Course

The Integrated Strategic Communication program at Washington State University emphasizes writing, research, and management principles throughout the course of study. This class, Public Relations Principles and Practices, focuses on the theory and practice of public relations, its function in organizations, and its role in society. The course mirrors the communication industry in that students are required to be creative, empathetic, collaborative and persuasive in their delivery of written and oral information.

Student Learning Outcomes

This activity is based on the curriculum shared by Nancy White (2010) of Full Circle Associates in KS Toolkit and is tailored similarly to a classroom activity taught by Dr. Matt Kushin (2015) in an undergraduate social media course at Shepherd University. We focus specifically on learning about community on both an individual and organizational level and visualize how links found within areas where audiences overlap are where the richest information is disseminated most rapidly. Through a simple individual social network mapping exercise, students can see how their various connections create communities centered around social objects and apply that concept to a brand and its brand community. Understanding brand audiences, brand communities, and the properties of these networks, along with considering how different communities overlap, helps students learn how to create audience-centric messages that improve consumer relationships and increase public relations task effectiveness.

Activity

Class Period One

On Day One, the class learned about social identity and social objects through the discussion of Tajfel's (1979) social identity theory and the concept of "social objects" as described by MacLeod (2017). Then

students participated in an exercise where they mapped their own social networks based upon the last 10 individuals with whom they had contact. These individuals could include a parent, spouse, teacher, or even a barista at a coffee stand they drove through that morning. The contact can be either physical or virtual.

We began the lesson with a brief discussion about how we are regularly exposed to the “six degrees” phenomenon (Witkop, 2019). For example, “I’m in a book club with Friend A who went to college with Friend B. How strange that they didn’t know one another back then, but met after Friend A married Friend C, who came across Friend B at a wine tasting event. What a small world.” Then, students were instructed to write “ME” in the center of a sheet of paper and distribute their ten individual contacts in a circle around them. Next, students used lines to connect themselves to each person, as well as people that know one another. Then students were asked to include the social objects that connect each pair of individuals (Figure 1).

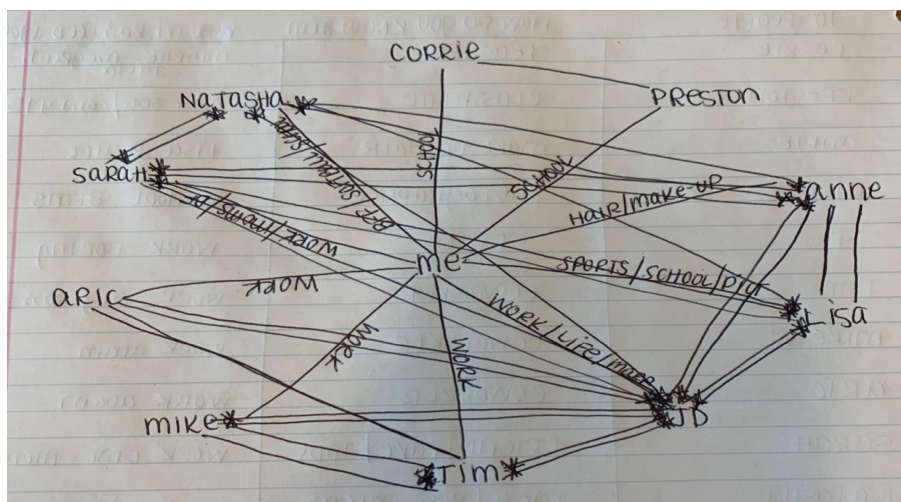


Figure 1. Example of one student’s social network map.

Finally, three volunteers transcribed their networks to the whiteboard next to one another and drew lines to connect the individuals in different communities that knew one another (Figure 2). This allowed the class to visualize how communities overlap, prompting the discussion on the “small world” phenomenon (Travers & Milgram, 1969). It quickly becomes apparent that we are not living in silos; rather, our community is linked both directly and indirectly with other communities. Furthermore, these links can serve as windows into our relationships within the focal community, teaching us why we identify with the focal community.

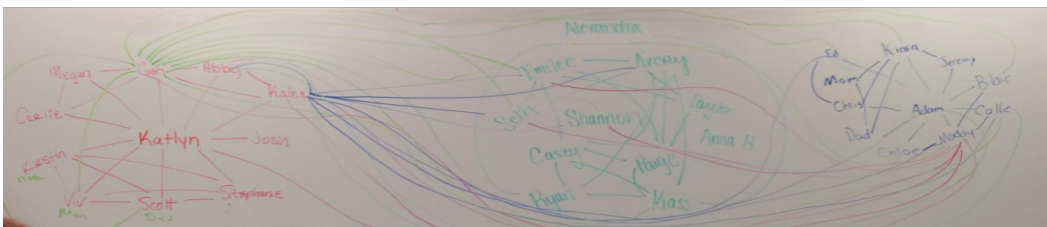


Figure 2. Example of comparative social network maps created by students.

Class Period Two

At the start of Day Two, students were asked to produce a “quick-write” statement, reflecting on the mapping activity from Day 1, and share what they have written with the class. “Quick writes,” usually followed by sharing content orally, is an instructional tool that serves as a basis for more collaborative learning activities (Shen, n.d.; Yost, 2019).

After discussing personal experiences regarding the social mapping exercise, the class explored the definition of public relations as published by the Public Relations Society of America (n.d.), which states that “public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other” (para. 2), followed by a review of the function of public relations as a part of the broader concept of integrated strategic communication. In this particular case, the conversation focused on the

industry, its sub-functions, and the general idea that PR professionals build relationships between an organization and its key audiences through their actions and communication.

A second quick-write followed, serving to book-end the conversation, with time to reflect and think critically about the content covered. The prompt for this two-minute reflection was, “What did exploring your social network teach you about public relations?” In their submissions, students shared their observations, which included statements such as, “I hadn’t considered the connections I have with so many people and the different things we connect around,” and “I can compare myself to a brand because I have more than one social network like a brand can have multiple communities.” In other words, most students made the connection between themselves and a brand, social objects, and products, while linking their individual networks to brand communities. After completing the exercise, a number of students felt compelled to reach out to some of their more distant social media acquaintances and venture out of their immediate social networks.

Discussion/Conclusion

Overview

Although it may be counterintuitive, information shared with a distant acquaintance will likely spread more effectively than if we shared it with our best friend. We forge the strongest ties with individuals with whom we have the most in common, which generates redundancies within our networks when information is shared. Consequently, reaching out to social media users with whom we have weak ties will be a much more effective means of spreading information among multiple networks (Grannoveter, 1973). This process is analogous to the relationships between brands and brand communities, as by reaching out to members who are on the periphery of a target audience, or by finding a bridge to a new audience through a current community with which strong ties are

already formed, a brand can introduce a message to a new community of potential loyal consumers.

This classroom activity explored the connection between interpersonal social networks and the formation of brand communities. Exploring the individual social network and the connections forged via social objects was a good way to introduce the concept of “brand community,” suggesting that individuals within brand communities are also connected by social objects. Brands will look to their communities to disseminate information and, by analyzing their weak ties, they can nurture their network, foster new communities, and spread a message further and faster.

Pedagogical Implications

Interactive teaching experiences are often more rewarding for students as well as teachers. Active engagement not only enhances learning but also makes education more interesting and allows for a much-needed break from traditional classroom lectures (Lumpkin et al., 2015). Rather than being the “sage-on-the-stage,” the instructor can take on the role of “instructional designer,” striving to create a course experience for students that promotes greater knowledge retention and transfer. The learning objectives of this brand community exercise are well-suited for inclusion into student-centered, active pedagogical experiences.

Understanding that we all have social networks with both strong and weak ties can help students appreciate the benefits of nurturing those relationships outside of their immediate community. New ideas are potentially just a bridge away, and analyzing our own social network maps can uncover many opportunities, allowing us to identify our strongest resources and showing us where best to send a message. Similarly, when a brand invests in broad consumer relationships, it increases the value of the brand community and fuels business growth and sustainability.

Future Considerations

An alternative version of this assignment is presented below, followed by a discussion of ways to expand the assignment to other groups and how to adapt the assignment to a large lecture class.

Suggestions for Additional Content

Rather than mapping a network based on their most recent interactions, it might be more beneficial for students to map multiple networks, considering groups like “family,” “work,” “gym,” and “book club.” This exercise would allow them to see how and where their own communities overlap and where available bridges reside, while helping them visualize opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Lesson Expansion

To further increase direct applicability to public relations functions, a social network mapping activity that focuses on a specific brand can be conducted during a second class period. Integrating a social network map into a client’s integrated strategic communications plan can uncover mutually beneficial relationships that can be exploited to achieve maximum communication impact.

Working in groups, students create a social network map for a selected brand, initially through identification of the brand’s community influencers. From there, students expand the map with bridges between the influencers and the brand’s target audiences. When students identify the community influencers (strong ties) within a brand community network and explore the influencer connections (weak ties) to others in diverse audience segments, the resulting network map reinforces Grannoveter’s (1973) “strength of weak ties” theory. The lesson emphasizes that a brand community and an individual community are similar in form and function. Similar to the relationships students discovered through their network maps on Day One, when brands reach out to weaker ties, they have the potential to spread their message further and more rapidly than by solely

nurturing the existing influencers.

Scalability

For larger class sizes, the activities discussed in this paper may be scaled by forming small groups, and asking group members to share their quick-writes, compare their networks, and find links within their groups.

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