Teaching Brief

Finding a Linkage Between Becoming an Ethical Practitioner and Making an Organization Socially Responsible

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This article describes how ethical frameworks were incorporated into a master's degree program's strategic communication course in Australia. Students were given three assignments. In the first assignment, students applied three different ethical frameworks to guide an organization in ethical decision making and devised communication messages for stakeholders that were in line with each ethical framework. In the second assignment, students created a corporate social responsibility proposal for their selected organization. In the final assignment, students discussed the role of communication practitioners in ethical decision making and corporate social responsibility. Although the overall design of this course was useful in facilitating student learning in the areas of public relations ethics and CSR, it was a challenge to ensure the same or a higher quality level of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: consequentialism, corporate social responsibility, deontology, ethical decision making, relativism, sustainability

Organizations often encounter ethical challenges. How they deal with those challenges affects their performance and even their survival. It is crucial for organizations to have an ethics counsel who can guide them to make ethical decisions. While communication professionals are expected to act as a corporate conscience (Pompper, 2015), the majority of practitioners are arguably not prepared to counsel management on ethical dilemmas their organizations face.

As boundary spanners, communication professionals are "dual representatives" (Holtzhausen, 2014, p. 31). Practitioners listen to both management and publics' interests and try to narrow the gap between each side's position on certain issues (Holtzhausen, 2014). It is crucial not only to respect the differences between both the organization and its publics, but also to ensure that the practitioner's voice is not marginalized (Holtzhausen, 2014). Instead of using communication purely for promotion (i.e., communicating to promote the organization's image), communication professionals can help organizations become authentic by matching the organization's communication with actions (Pompper, 2015).

Accordingly, communication practitioners play a crucial role in guiding organizational leaders to act ethically (Pompper, 2015). They also help organizations plan and implement meaningful corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability programs. More importantly, an organization's ethical behavior can form a basis of trust in organization relationships (Bowen et al., 2016) and can enhance organizational effectiveness (Bowen, 2008). Despite this, the training of public relations students and professionals around ethical decision making and behavior is deficient.

To address this issue, the author developed three assignments that asked master's level students in a strategic communication course in Australia to (1) critically analyze a case using three ethical frameworks, (2) devise a CSR campaign, and (3) discuss the linkage between becoming

an ethical practitioner and making an organization socially responsible and ethical. The following is a review of the literature that guided the assignments' development.

Literature Review

Ethics in Public Relations

Public relations has been considered a normative practice that promotes dialogue and mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics (Bowen et al., 2016). Notably, Bowen et al. (2016) conceptualized ethics as a precursor for organization-public relationships. Numerous studies have emerged to explain ethical public relations practices such as dialogic communication (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014), an ethical framework for advocacy (Edgett, 2002), the role of ethics in communication program evaluation (Place, 2015), the moral development of public relations practitioners (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009), and Millennials' approaches to ethical decision making (Curtin et al., 2011). Together, these studies have progressed our understanding of ethical decision-making and behaviors in the communications field.

Ethical frameworks can help organizations assess ethical issues before they make decisions that affect themselves as well as their stakeholders. Several scholars have incorporated ethical frameworks into public relations research to better understand consumers' reactions to organizations' behaviors (e.g., Xu & Ma, 2016). Across ethical frameworks such as deontology, consequentialism, and relativism, deontology has been studied most extensively in public relations (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013).

Deontology suggests that an action may be considered moral or immoral regardless of its consequences (Krishna et al., 2018). As such, evaluating ethicality using deontology involves the consideration of moral obligations (Velasquez, 2011). Deontology puts forward the case that there

are things we should not do even if it is to maximize utility. In contrast, consequentialist principles draw from teleological theories where behavior is considered morally right "only if it produces for all people a greater balance of good over bad consequences than other available alternatives" (Hunt & Vasquez-Parraga, 1993, p. 79). This consequentialist approach involves a benefit-harm assessment by which the decision makers need to calculate whether the benefits to stakeholders outweigh the harm (Tilley, 2005). Ethical relativism, comparatively, is based on a view that ultimately there are no right or wrong decisions, and ethical judgments are dependent on an individual's culture, society, or personal feelings (DesJardins, 2014).

In addition to the aforementioned frameworks, several models for ethical decision making have also been proposed in the literature. For example, Bowen (2005) puts forward an ethical decision making model in issue management; Tilley (2005) suggests an ethics pyramid to integrate ethical intent, means, and ends; Bivins (1992) proposes a system model for ethical decision making; and van Dijk et al. (2012) support a virtues perspective. This diverse range of ethical frameworks and models were presented to the students in this course to guide their own decision-making across the three assignments.

CSR and Public Relations

Although several scholars have attempted to define CSR, there is still no consensus on the definition of the concept (Dahlsrud, 2008). As identified by Votaw (1972) almost 50 years ago, "corporate social responsibility means something, but not always the same thing to everybody" (p. 25). This sentiment is still prevalent today with CSR being associated with many terms such as corporate citizenship, corporate social value, and strategic philanthropy. Within this literature, two concepts, CSR and sustainability, are crucial in the instructional setting for this teaching brief.

CSR is widely considered part of a business' ethical practices

(Park & Kang, 2020). The concept can be generally defined as corporations' efforts to meet the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities expected by stakeholders (Maignan, 2001). Some recent examples of CSR campaigns include Unilever's "Farewell to the forest" and Samsung's "Bring light to Ethiopia" (Oprea, 2020). Through the campaign, Unilever publicly established its goal to protect one million trees in Brazil and Indonesia by 2020 (Oprea, 2020). Samsung on the other hand, has partnered with the Korea International Volunteer Organization to provide solar-powered lanterns to areas where electricity is scarce (Oprea, 2020). Both examples highlight ways in which these organizations are contributing to their CSR efforts.

The concept of sustainability has similar definitional challenges as CSR. For instance, the phrase sustainable communities has emerged from scholars and practitioners in environmentalism who have begun to promote the ideas of pro-environmental changes to redress the negative environmental and social impact of economic growth and development in cities and communities (Portney, 2005). Today, sustainability is generally understood as a strategy to pursue ecological health, social equity, and economic welfare. This interpretation requires a long-term perspective and commitment to the well-being of current and future generations. As many current CSR practices strive to implement the concept of sustainable development, the term corporate sustainability is used as a sustainability-driven, sub-concept of CSR (Kleine & von Hauff, 2009).

While CSR skepticism exists (Rim & Kim, 2016), it is generally accepted among businesses that their operations have consequences on society, stakeholders, and the environment. As such, many organizations strive to implement CSR and sustainability programs to reduce their negative impact and create a positive impact on society and the environment while meeting their economic goals. Daniella Foster, senior director of corporate responsibility at Hilton, said, "sustainable and

inclusive growth is good business and the companies that have aligned their business growth strategies to their ethics will be a step ahead in future-proofing their business" (McPherson, 2019, para. 9).

Pompper (2015) argues that communication professionals play a crucial role in making organizations socially responsible and sustainable. Pompper (2015) highlights that communication professionals perform an insider-activist role in navigating CSR and sustainability. While working as an ethical counselor for their organization, Pompper (2015) notes that communication professionals need to advocate for stakeholders' interests throughout the organization's decision-making process in order to develop optimal CSR and sustainability programs for their organizations.

Ethical Frameworks and CSR

Ethical frameworks provide a way for us to understand what drives different individual's decision-making and behaviors and can be applied to organizational programs such as CSR. For example, parts of CSR programs such as fulfilling social responsibilities can be interpreted as an organization's moral duty to society under the deontological framework. However, considering the consequences of an organization's behavior on society or the environment aligns with a consequential view. In the course, students are expected to contemplate to whom, why, and how organizations should be socially responsible and utilize these ethical frameworks to guide their critical thinking.

Strategic Communications Course Assignment

About the Course

The course presented in this teaching brief is mandatory for students completing a master's degree in strategic communication at a university in Australia. At the beginning of the semester, students discussed barriers to ethical communication practices. Students were introduced to different ethical frameworks, such as deontology, consequentialism, and relativism and several models for ethical decision

making, such as the system model (Bivins, 1992), ethics pyramid (Tilley, 2005), and virtues perspective (van Dijk et al., 2012). By learning about different ethical perspectives, students were expected to understand the significance of ethics in communication practices.

In the second half of the semester, students were required to create a CSR proposal for a selected organization. Through this task, students learned to adapt to stakeholder expectations to maintain a social licence and ensure sustainability. Students also learned about project management tools, such as scheduling, budgeting, and measuring effectiveness.

Learning Outcomes

By completing this course, students are able to (a) critically evaluate ethical issues in managing public communication, (b) apply theories and technical skills to develop and implement solutions to ethical challenges, and (c) explore the parameters of corporate social responsibility.

Classroom Activities

In the first four weeks of the semester, students were given ethics case studies from the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA, n.d.) to review. Students were asked to identify ethical issue(s) and factors that may affect ethical decision making in the case studies as well as the publics who may be affected by the decisions. Students then selected ethical principles to guide the decision-making process before finally making a decision. In Week 4, a four-hour workshop was held. Starting with an introduction about ethics, four different ethical frameworks— deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and relativism—were described, and the pros and cons of each framework were discussed. Following this lesson, students worked in groups to discuss and apply each framework to a case study.

In the latter half of the semester, students learned about CSR and its relevant concepts, such as sustainability and Corporate Shared Value

(CSV) followed by communication campaign elements. This allowed the students to devise a CSR campaign. Each week, students were required to complete a task, such as a situation analysis, stakeholder mapping, or brainstorming strategic directions for their CSR campaign.

Assignments and Rubrics

A total of three assignments were designed for this course. The first assignment was a written critical case study analysis that was an individual assignment worth 30% of a total grade. The second assignment was a CSR and sustainability proposal, which was a group assignment (30%) that was accompanied by a peer evaluation (10%). The third assignment consisted of two parts: online participation (15%) and reflection (15%), both individual assignments.

In writing a critical case study analysis (Assignment 1), students analyzed and evaluated an assigned case by applying three ethical frameworks (i.e., deontology, consequentialism, and relativism) and recommended ethical decision-making models and communication strategies (See Table 1 for Assignment 1 Rubric).

Table 1: *Rubrics for Assignment 1*

Criteria	Weight (%)
Effectiveness and appropriateness of application of concepts and theories applied	30
Validity of issue and stakeholder identification and strategic recommendations	25
Organization and clarity of presentation	20
Depth of engagement with academic literature	25

Working in groups, the second assignment required students to write a CSR and sustainability proposal for their selected organization (Assignment 2). This proposal needed to include a situation analysis,

a review of the organization's previous CSR and sustainability efforts, the publics' perception of the organization, a competitor analysis, public identification, recommended CSR strategies and tactics, a budget, a timeline, and an evaluation. In conducting a situation analysis, primary research methods, such as surveys or interviews, were required (See Table 2 for Assignment 2 Rubric).

Table 2: *Rubrics for Assignment 2*

Criteria	Weight (%)
Effectiveness and appropriateness of concepts and theories applied	30
Validity of strategic recommendations	30
Team collaboration in the development of communication strategies	25
Professional standard report layout, including budget, timeline, and breadth of referencing	15

The third assignment was split into two parts. Students participated in online activities weekly via an online learning platform (Assignment 3A). The online activities ranged from a discussion of short case studies to completing polls. The students' online contribution needed to reflect consideration of the lecture content and critical engagement with the weekly readings. Students also needed to acknowledge and respect their peers' different perspectives.

Finally, students were required to write a 1,000-word reflection on the linkage between becoming an ethical communications practitioner and making an organization ethical and socially responsible (Assignment 3B). The following guiding questions were given to students: What are the roles of a communication practitioner?; Why is an organization's ethical decision-making important?; How do ethical orientations help?; Why

should an organization be socially responsible?; and How does being an ethical practitioner relate to making the organization socially responsible? (See Table 3 for Assignment 3 Rubric).

Table 3: *Rubrics for Assignment 3*

Criteria	Weight (%)
Assignment 3A: Academic coherence of contribution	10
Assignment 3A: Evidence of critical engagement with lecture content and readings	15
Assignment 3A: Reflection and acknowledgement of the diversity in members' different perspectives	15
Assignment 3A: Pertinence of independently sourced (and/or original) contributions beyond subject-specific content	10
Assignment 3B: Depth of engagement with academic literature	20
Assignment 3B: Depth of reflection and insights	20
Assignment 3B: Structure, referencing and clarity of expression	10

Discussion and Conclusion

Through teaching this course, the author observed students gradually develop an understanding about ethical frameworks and how to apply these to case studies. In the course, students were first given PRSA ethics case studies before being asked to apply deontology, consequentialism, and relativism to cases prepared by the instructor. While some students were able to develop their logic and reasoning from the case studies provided, other students found ethical frameworks difficult to

understand and apply. Thus, more case studies should be made available online for students to practice and better understand the application of ethical frameworks.

In the second half of the semester, students enjoyed devising the CSR campaign proposal. However, understanding CSR concepts varied among students. The instructor provided general guidelines and expectations that CSR as pet projects or corporate propaganda were to be avoided, and partnerships that contributed to both society and to the organization were encouraged. However, even though a warning was given from the instructor that CSR should not be used as a crisis management strategy for an image management purpose, some students still considered CSR as part of impression management or as a response to a crisis.

There are three key lessons learned from teaching this course. First, students found it challenging to link the role of public relations professionals to ethical decision making and to demonstrate a professional skill set when they may have never worked in the industry. However, when students were given enough opportunities to apply each ethical framework to several cases, the majority were able to do so. This issue also arose when students were asked to devise three different communication messages that reflected their analysis of the three different ethical frameworks. As such, the author identified that, to some extent, it is helpful to provide examples of how communication messages can be created. If students had taken a media writing course before taking this course, it would have created more synergetic effects on their learning outcomes.

Second, while the role of communication practitioners was highlighted throughout the semester, some of the concepts were considered vague by students who did not have professional experience. Of note, the idea of being a boundary spanner who should find a way

to make an organization act ethically even if the decision is not in the organization's best interest (Holtzhausen, 2014) was challenging for some students to grasp. As a result, they had difficulty understanding the reason why communication professionals are involved in devising CSR programs and how being an ethical practitioner is related to making his/her organization ethical. Using multimedia content to provide examples via online learning platforms was helpful in addressing this issue.

Finally, the author felt that more effective facilitation of online learning is needed for teaching this course in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the author and many other lecturers around the world an opportunity to think about how to better facilitate online learning. The author sought a way to redesign this course's online learning platform to encourage students' participation in online discussions on ethics and CSR that would actually give opportunities for them to apply their learning from the readings to practice. As a result, the author implemented online participation as a weekly activity that students needed to work on before coming to class. Through feedback, students told the author that the online activities were not overwhelming and rather helpful for their understanding. In the future when a hybrid mode of learning (i.e., mix of asynchronous and synchronous learning) will become the new normal, it will be crucial to create an online learning environment that allows students to have a better learning experience. The platform the author's institution uses allowed her to test various functions from online discussions to peer feedback. Although the author felt that the overall design of this course was useful in facilitating student learning in the areas of public relations ethics and CSR, it was a challenge to ensure the same level of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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