

Teaching Brief

**A Critical Dialogical Approach to Teaching
Public Relations Students Intercultural
Competence**

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ABSTRACT

Facing a highly globalized and diversified market, public relations students should acquire intercultural competence before entering the industry. This article proposes to use a critical dialogical approach (Freire, 2000) to public relations education to foster students' intercultural competence. Key steps in this innovation and a sample assignment designed with it are provided to illustrate the use of this teaching method in public relations education.

KEYWORDS: Public relations education, critical dialogical approach, intercultural competence

Introduction

Globalization creates a huge need for public relations students and practitioners to achieve intercultural competence. Although various courses such as *Intercultural Communication and Intercultural/International Public Relations* are offered in universities to foster this competence, the public relations industry continues to be concerned with students lacking a true multicultural perspective and intercultural competence (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). To tackle this issue, we suggest adopting the critical dialogical approach developed by Paulo Freire (2000).

This approach aligns with the traditional service-learning/client-work approach to public relations education (Texter & Smith, 1999). And it exposes students to real-world cultural issues and allows them to immerse themselves in different social and cultural realities. In addition, it helps students transform themselves from tactics-driven rote learners to active cultural participants. It challenges them to use public relations to resolve cultural issues, which raises students' intercultural competence.

Rationale

Intercultural competence is important to public relations practitioners and students because an increasingly globalized and diversified world market needs it badly (Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005; Taylor, 2001; Tsetsura, 2011; Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). More importantly, one of the core elements of intercultural competence, developing relationships with individuals and groups across cultures (Deardorff, 2009), speaks to the core value of public relations: relationship development and maintenance (Cutlip et al., 1994). Other elements of intercultural competence include the ability to understand the context and connectedness of different cultures, to transcend boundaries and transform differences, and, most importantly, to respect each other (Deardorff, 2009).

Courses such as *Intercultural Communication and Intercultural/International Public Relations* are offered to foster intercultural competence. Unfortunately, in these classes, students tend to view culture as fixed in history, or predetermined (Halualani, 2011). Somewhat useful, still, this view has prevented students from understanding multiple cultural contexts, and from establishing connections with different cultures (Gallicano, 2013; Munshi & Edwards, 2011). In this view, culture was perceived as a value-neutral commodity distant from and irrelevant to them. In addition, cultural differences are depicted as problems that need to be resolved and overcome or differences that need to be toned down and assimilated (Sobre, 2017). Hence, it is difficult for students to transform the cultural barriers into bonds, to genuinely respect differences, and to build relationships of mutuality with individuals and groups across cultures.

To tackle this issue, public relations scholars (Gallicano, 2013; Munshi & Edwards, 2011; Tstetsura, 2011) have urged educators to employ a multidimensional approach that connects culture and diversity with larger social, political, and historical contexts from perspectives of diverse publics to ensure students are able to comprehend the multifaceted nature of the underlying concepts. Specifically, Tstetsura (2011) suggested that educators and students should explore cultural identities beyond the pre-existing categories such as race, gender, ethnicity or national heritage, and examine the individual's experiences via relationship-building process. In addition, Gallicano (2013) identified common problems such as using colorblind and genderblind approaches in agencies' public relations practices; accordingly, she and other scholars (Brown et al., 2011; Tstetsura, 2011) encouraged educators to use diverse teaching methods such as videos, class discussions, and guest speakers to break the cultural barriers. Furthermore, culturally sensitive assignments centered around language accommodation can facilitate the multidimensional approach

in public relations education. For instance, Flowers (2020) developed a social media writing assignment for training students to accommodate international English-speaking populations' cultural traditions when creating online content for a fictitious client. The assignment enabled students to be considerate when using U.S.-centered idioms and to apply culturally sensitive verbal and visual content that avoids ethnocentrism and othering. With the current effort, students' intercultural competence could be enhanced through the process of relationship-building, macro-level cultural immersion, and cultural accommodation assignments.

As a continuum, we suggest that adopting a critical dialogical approach (Freire, 2000) to public relations education offers a great opportunity to help students acquire intercultural competence. This approach stems from a critical-pedagogy perspective, which addresses cultural issues in a macro-context, whether historical, social, or political, as well as examining the power, relevance, and hidden or destabilizing aspects of cultures (Martin & Nakayama, 2000). By showing students the big picture of cultural issues, this approach facilitates a holistic understanding of the broader cultural contexts of these issues and the issues' connections with the society at large.

Secondly, this approach advocates for participatory learning in public relations education, aligning it with the service-learning/client-work approach to teaching (Texter & Smith, 1999) to make the adoption smooth. Thirdly, this approach can be applied to any public relations course, so that learning intercultural competence is not confined only to culture-related courses but could become widespread in public relations programs.

Critical Dialogical Approach

According to Freire (2000), a critical dialogical approach has three pillars. The first one is the reconfiguration of the student-teacher relationship, resolving the contradiction by recognizing that knowledge

is not deposited from the teacher to the student but is formed through dialogue. Compared to a top-down “banking” (deposit-withdrawal) model critiqued by several scholars (Freire, 2000; Sobre, 2017) for its rigidity and lack of reflexivity, a dialogical approach encourages the co-formation of knowledge from conversations between teachers and students.

The second pillar is participatory learning by students grounded in their individual experience and circumstances in relation to social-cultural issues. This pillar aligns with the service-learning/client-work teaching in public relations education. The difference is that the critical dialogical approach specifically grounds students in cultural issues and challenges students to apply public relations knowledge to resolve the issues, so students can immerse themselves in specific cultures to understand them comparatively and critically.

The third pillar is transformative learning in self-reflection. Reflection on their own processes and those of others encourages students to question their previous assumptions and knowledge. This process moves them to a deeper understanding of what others experience and believe and how to connect with it. Through reflection, students can identify multidimensional power relations associated with a cultural issue, navigate the ambiguity and complexity, and ultimately transcend and transform differences between cultures through dialogue and self-reflection.

Adopting the Critical Dialogical Approach

The adoption of this approach to public relations education to foster students’ intercultural competence takes three steps, reflected in the three pillars mentioned above.

Step One: Focus on Non-Dominant Cultural Groups

The first and most critical step involves selecting a client with a project that can provide intercultural learning experiences. Instructors should look for organizational clients that serve non-dominant cultural

groups such as immigrants, LGBTQ+ communities, persons with disabilities, or senior citizens. Selecting such clients would enable students to understand the complexity of power relationships in any given cultural issue by using a critical perspective. If implementing this approach in a senior level course, the instructor should encourage students to seek clients by themselves, which in turn helps students build direct connections with the local community.

To start, the instructors/students work with the client to identify a key intercultural challenge. This could be a lack of meaningful communication or contact between the non-dominant cultural group and the dominant one, or misunderstandings and biases in the society at large towards this non-dominant group. In this way, student participation is galvanized by enacting real scenarios for learning.

Step Two: Foster a Dialogical Learning Environment

Second, a dialogical learning environment should be facilitated when discussing the intercultural challenge. In this environment, instructors should be the facilitators of the conversation, instead of an authoritarian leader. Students should be encouraged to pose questions and share concerns or voice their (mis)understandings regarding cultural issues they have difficulty comprehending. In this way, a reconfiguration of the student-teacher contradiction (Freire, 2000) can actually occur. It is important to note that fostering a safe and civil classroom environment is critical for the successful execution of this approach. Some ground rules should be established, such as respect everyone's right to speak, listen first, respond, and use civil language.

Step Three: Conversations with the Client

Third, the client should be invited to sit in with the class at least twice. The first time should involve the client briefing students. The second time should involve the client evaluating student work. Although inviting a client into classrooms is common for any client-

work/service-learning approach, for critical dialogical approach, it should be emphasized that the client should be focused on the cultural aspect of the project. In addition to the two in-class conversations, students should be encouraged to meet with clients outside of the classroom to better understand and serve their needs. Some small tasks should be implemented to encourage such interaction. For instance, the instructor could require each student group to meet (virtually or physically) with the client at least twice throughout the project. The meetings are intended at helping students to: 1) establish relationships with the client and better understand their needs; and 2) seek suggestions and feedback from the client. These meetings should be recorded, and meeting minutes should be submitted as a part of the assignment. It is ideal if the client can be in communication with the students throughout the project; however, it is not required. Through communication with the client, students' understanding of the cultural issue in question can be reinforced and misunderstandings can be challenged or resolved, so that self-reflection can be realized. It is also beneficial to invite different representatives of the client to visit the class, as it can teach students that even within a given culture, different people have different perspectives.

The following outlines a specific assignment adopting this approach. The instructors' observations are shared to illustrate the way this approach can foster intercultural competence.

Implementation: Sample Assignment

We designed an assignment in partnership with a local community organization serving residents of a city's Chinatown. It was a major assignment in a *Strategic Social Media for Public Relations* course for third-year public relations majors. The project lasted three weeks, and students worked in small groups.

The key learning objectives were: 1) to understand cultural issues within the larger structure of the macro-context (governmental,

institutional, legal, and economic) and grasp the mediating forces that affect micro-acts such as small-group and interpersonal cultural encounters; 2) to develop skills in communicating with the client serving a non-dominant culture and understanding the cultural issue critically; 3) to develop an effective and culturally appropriate social media fundraising plan that demonstrates understanding of and respect for the culture.

Background of the Client and Project

The organization serves the local Chinatown. This Chinatown has more than a 100-year history and was first developed when Chinese railway workers came to the city (Sciban & Wang, 2013). It established and preserved Asian heritage in the city while becoming a cultural interface for the interconnection of many diverse cultures. The cultural conflict in question occurred in 2018, when the city development authority approved a development permit (Vaessen & Gallichan-Lowe, 2018) that contradicted official guidelines for Chinatown's development. The development of two 27-story towers in the heart of Chinatown did not fit this unique cultural and historical environment. It threatened to limit Chinatown's revitalization by increasing traffic enough that it would pose a significant risk to pedestrians and by restricting access of visitors in the elimination of street parking. Due to these detriments, legal action had to be taken for the future of the community. The client sought to raise money for legal fees to appeal the development permit. The intercultural challenge the client faced was persuading the public that irresponsible development in Chinatown is detrimental to the community on the micro- and macro-scale, including to much of the rest of the city.

Week One: Posing the Problem

In the first week, a representative of the client, a Chinese-descended Canadian, met with the class to present the challenge. He introduced the unique historical and cultural background of Chinatown. He also shared the issue's background -- gentrification without considering

those it displaces -- to the students, explaining why Chinatown was against this development.

After the client's visit, students were excited and motivated by the project. Students shared their experiences and understanding of Chinatown. At the end of the first week of class, students were encouraged to further investigate the issue and bring any questions they had to the second week's class.

Week Two: Analyzing the Cultural Issue through Dialogue

In the second week, the instructor organized the class in a dialogical manner, guiding students through the development of the social media fundraising plan. When discussing their understanding of the case, many students struggled to grasp that "development" could be a problem for Chinatown. Based on their own research, many believed that economic development was just what Chinatown needed. Without telling students about any harm from gentrification, the instructor encouraged them to voice any disagreements or confusion. Most students said that economic development might not be a threat to Chinatown. A small number were able to identify the cultural problem behind the economic problem. The instructors encouraged students holding different views to discuss them and guided this process.

After several rounds of discussions and conversations, the class tentatively concluded that there were three main problems: 1) the new development would directly threaten the cultural and historical inheritance of Chinatown; 2) the development would negatively influence the lifestyle of Chinatown residents, who are predominantly seniors on foot; and 3) the changes would overpopulate Chinatown, bringing more traffic than it could handle and would eventually hinder its development. Students mapped out unequal power relationships among the city, the developer, and the residents. Most students gained perspective when they examined the development plan from the point of view of Chinatown's residents.

They used the remaining class time and off-class time to work on the fundraising plan and prepared for their presentation in the coming week.

Week Three: Enhancing Intercultural Competence Through Action and Reflection

In the third week, the client sent three members of the organization to the in-class presentation. The representatives and instructor provided feedback for each group's presentation. Eleven fundraising plans were presented. Visitors were highly impressed with the students' ability to use social media as a fundraising tool, and more importantly, students' intercultural competence. For example, prior to the day of the presentation, one group emailed the instructor and asked if using a fortune cookie as a channel to convey the message would offend the client. Students understood that fortune cookies originated in North America. Another group double-checked with the instructor to see if they had pronounced the Chinese word "hongbao" (red envelope) correctly. They were genuinely concerned that the client might be upset if they mispronounced it.

Student presentations also demonstrated the intercultural competence they developed through this project. First of all, the visual aids most students used were in red and yellow, which symbolize Chinese culture in a broad sense. This choice was appreciated by the client. Secondly, students integrated cultural elements in their plan. For example, several groups mentioned using the traditional idea of *Red Envelope* to send out coupons from Chinatown businesses as incentives for the donation. Some groups mentioned using the Lunar New Year rather than Chinese New Year as a more culturally inclusive strategy to raise awareness of the issue and advertise "Chinatown for Everyone."

Two groups used the traditional Chinese value of respecting seniors, which had never been taught in class, as the main message for the fundraising campaign. Students explained that Chinatown was home to many seniors. Caring for and respecting elders was at the core

of Pan-Asian culture. Their campaigns advocated that the value of filial piety should be recognized across cultures -- because every family has seniors. The transcendence of cultural differences is achieved here. The client commented that these two groups understood the deeper layer of Chinatown culture and bridged it with the wider Canadian cultures. Based on the feedback and comments from the client in week three's class, students revised their plans and submitted the final version.

The fundraising campaign began a few weeks after students submitted their plans for the campaign. Several suggestions from students have been accepted and implemented, as evident in Chinatown's "Go-Fund-Me" page and its social media accounts across different platforms.

Assessment

Assessment Guidelines

The assessment of any assignment using this approach needs to evaluate two different issues: 1) students' intercultural competence; and 2) students' ability to translate intercultural competence into public relations practices. Specifically, each assignment/project should be evaluated on the students' ability to accomplish the following: 1) to demonstrate understanding and respect for the culture and the culture's issues; 2) using public relations knowledge and theory to develop a culturally respected and effective plan/campaign to address the cultural issues raised by the client; 3) based on the developed plan/campaign, to deliver a culturally appropriate and effective presentation to the client. It is also important to include the client in the assessment process.

Assessment of the Sample Assignment

The assignment above counted for 25% of the total grade, the social media fundraising plan 20%, and the presentation 5%. Both the instructor and the client graded the plans and presentations. The client was instructed to focus on the cultural appropriateness and feasibility of the plan and presentation, while the instructor focused on the public relations

perspective (the client received a grading rubric from the instructor). The final marks were the average of the client's and the instructor's (50/50).

Measuring Intercultural Competence in Future Assignments

Due to the time constraint on the sample assignment, students' intercultural competence was not measured beyond the client's qualitative feedback. For future assessments, students' intercultural competence should be measured to ascertain if this approach is successful. There are several ways to gauge students' competence development. For example, a pre-and post-test of students' intercultural competence can help both students and the instructor to assess the effectiveness of this approach. Valid scales can be used, for instance, the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) (Koester & Olebe, 1988), the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) (Fantini, 2006), and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, 2012). In addition, a reflection paper from students examining their intercultural competence development through the project can provide qualitative insights of students' learning journey (Deardorff, 2011).

Conclusion

To foster intercultural competence, applying a critical dialogical approach to public relations education provides opportunities for students to gain first-hand experience working with a client from a non-dominant culture on a cultural challenge.

We suggest taking this approach with junior or senior classes. This way students will have a solid foundation with which to understand the macro- and micro-processes of culture and public relations. We mentioned earlier that the target organizational clients are those who serve non-dominant cultural groups. However, considering many universities in North America are located in small towns with limited clients from/serving non-dominant groups, we suggest seeking groups or organizations within the university as clients, such as the Office of Inclusion and Diversity,

the Office of Indigenous Affairs, and various student organizations/clubs serving non-dominant student demographics (e.g., Chinese students association or first-generation college students club). Another alternative is to obtain clients online. For example, the United Nations has an online volunteering program (<https://www.onlinevolunteering.org/en>) providing a list of organizations that need volunteers who can work remotely. By utilizing this list, the instructor/students can find a variety of organizations in need of volunteers, while also meeting the need to serve non-dominant groups in the process.

This approach could be used in a variety of public relations courses. A *Writing* course could use it to develop media materials for a nondominant cultural group. A *Public Relations Management* course or a *Capstone Public Relations* course could adopt this approach and ask students to develop a campaign for a nondominant cultural organization. The critical dialogical approach also can be used in other service-learning public relations courses, such as *Public Relations Campaigns*. The approach enables students to apply their knowledge and theories in an intercultural context and become a capable candidate for jobs in public relations.

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