

## **Digital Learning: Standards and Best Practices for Public Relations Education in Undergraduate Programs**

Carolyn Kim, Biola University  
Keith Quesenberry, Messiah University  
Karen Sutherland, University of the Sunshine Coast  
Karen Freberg, University of Louisville

### ABSTRACT

Traditional enrollment in higher education has been declining, while online enrollment has increased for the fourteenth year (Seaman et al., 2018, p.3). Fifty-three percent of public relations educators indicate offering online public relations courses, 6% with online undergraduate degrees (DiStaso, 2019), and the U.S. has 53 online public relations master's degrees. With COVID-19 and institutions switching to online and remote learning, higher education best practices for digital learning have become a primary consideration. However, there is limited, specific research on online education for public relations. A survey of 157 faculty and students with online public relations course experience identified best-practices for learning methods, engaging communication, and courses suited for online. Findings include recommendations for specific pedagogical approaches appropriate for particular public relations courses and recommendations for the most effective course communication practices to guide faculty development, resources, assessment, and strategic pedagogical practices.

*Keywords:* public relations pedagogy, online learning, teaching public relations, digital learning, digital pedagogy

**Acknowledgment:** This study is created from the workgroup with the Commission for PR Education's focus on digital learning in Public Relations

**Editorial Record:** Original draft submitted May 18, 2020. Revisions submitted August 24, 2020; December 1, 2020; and February 18, 2021. Manuscript accepted for publication March 22, 2021. First published online September 2021.

With the impact of COVID-19 and institutions worldwide switching to online and remote learning, higher education best practices for digital learning became a primary consideration for administrators, faculty, and students alike. To provide a foundation of support for best practices within the discipline of public relations, the *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State, Educators and Practitioners report* issued by the Commission on Public Relations Education (2018) identified online education in public relations with two key factors. The report identified online learning as an area that will influence both the future of public relations and an area requiring further clarification for guidelines and standards. Building from the recommendation for further guidelines, this study was designed to explore areas critical to future success and effectiveness in online public relations undergraduate education.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Online Learning Growth and Perceptions**

As the higher education landscape continues to shift, online learning represents both a sector for growing enrollment and opportunities for more students and a sector that necessitates new standards and practices within the academy (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018). In fact, as traditional enrollment declines for institutions of higher education, online enrollment is continuing to increase for the fourteenth year in a row (Seaman et al., 2018). Online learning falls under the broader sector of distance education, allowing students to engage with faculty and programs that are not necessarily geographically close. As more programs and institutions adopt digital tools to expand education's reach, online learning has taken many forms. Courses that leverage online learning for 30% – 80% of the course are considered hybrid and blend a traditional face-to-face approach with online education. Those that deliver 80% or more of the content digitally are considered fully online (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

The reality is, however, that one of the most significant criticisms of online education is that it will not deliver the same quality or breadth of education that a traditional, face-to-face education delivers (Chao et al., 2006; Saad et al., Busted, & Ogisi, 2013). Concerns have included “teaching effectiveness, faculty-to-student ratios, attrition rates, student satisfaction, and institutional resources invested in online delivery” as primary concerns in online learning (Chao et al., 2006, p. 1). While studies have identified this perception for a number of years, it has been heightened in the general public due to the experience many students had transitioning into an online learning environment in the middle of a semester due to the COVID-19 (Lederman, 2020). Studies suggest that communication or engagement is critical for successful online learning (Cole et al., 2014). In other words, communication with faculty in order to recruit, equip, and prepare them for teaching online is critical. Furthermore, it is equally important to cultivate a vibrant communication environment within online courses that will facilitate student/faculty interaction, engagement with assignments and course expectations, and peer-to-peer connection.

### **No One-Size Fits All Approach to Online Learning**

One significant area of communication deals with defining, developing, and equipping online educators. While some institutions seem to be moving toward the construct that all educators should be able to teach in any modality, some studies indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to online faculty. Studies suggest that some faculty may thrive in an online environment, and others may not be able to based on qualifications, experience, and perceptions held by the educators (Kim & Freberg, 2018). Some faculty may prefer to teach either traditional or online courses, or a combination of those, while others may enjoy a hybrid model. Current research suggests that faculty who teach in online programs must effectively manage a digital setting, and training is a

central component of effective online education. As with a traditional classroom, development related to integrating student evaluations and voices (Gómez-Rey et al., 2018; Secret et al., 2016), assessment practices (Tinoca & Oliveira, 2013), and professional training opportunities (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Lawrence & Tar, 2018) influence perceptions about online education (Frazer et al., 2017).

Once institutions clarify who will (or should) teach online courses, it is equally important to communicate information regarding processes to develop a course, run a course, and manage technical components to a course. A survey of faculty by Inside Higher Ed and Gallup found nine out of 10 faculty reported being involved in online or hybrid course design. However, only 25% reported using an instructional designer (Jaschik & Lederman, 2018). Research suggests there are different ways of training faculty to teach online. Some institutions require faculty to complete training, while others do not, and some have faculty design their online courses while others utilize instructional designers (Lowenthal et al., 2019). Support can come from the school, institution, or outside vendor and varies from supplying instructional designers, providing training, and providing technical support. This support can take the form of online training, workshops, one-on-one, and informal mentoring for technology, Learning Management Systems, course design, pedagogy, assessment, and accessibility (Andrade et al., 2019). While communicating to faculty about how to define, develop, and cultivate excellence as an educator is important, it is also critical that communication about learning and expectations occurs for students within online courses.

### **Communication Practices in Online Environments**

Communication in an online learning environment is extremely important (Dixson, 2017; Hajibayova, 2017). It can influence students' learning, motivation, desire to stay enrolled, and their belief that they are connected to peers and the faculty member. Many students identify the

lack of communication as one of the most significant challenges in online learning and the reason they feel isolated (Chao et al., 2006; Cole et al., 2014).

**Out-of-Class Communication.** Previous studies have confirmed the role of communication in education, with a growing body of research focusing specifically on out-of-class communication (OCC) (Kim, 2018). In an online class, intentionally building OCC between faculty and students is a critical element to consider. This is because OCC has been linked to the ability for students to adjust to the academy, retention in learning, perceptions of faculty members, and the potential to increase motivation among students in courses (Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Jaasma & Koper, 2002; Kim, 2017; Terenzini et al., 1996). Thus, traditional communication elements to courses and OCC are important when considering best practices for the future of online learning in public relations education.

**Course Related Communication.** Scholars have. Additionally, discussion and interactive assignments that prompt students with thought-provoking real-world situation questions invite the sharing of diverse opinions, and personal perspectives tend to elicit more engagement (Buelow et al., 2018).

While there are best practices for communication, research has found that students can vary in their capabilities of performing well in an online teaching environment. Schommer-Aikins and Easter (2018) found that students with higher cognitive flexibility were better at exploring online sources, monitoring their success, and engaging with peers and instructors online. While it may seem to mirror what educators encounter in traditional classrooms, the study also found that students with high procrastination were less capable of time management (Aikin & Easter, 2018). Additionally, students that had a strong need for closure were less capable of managing stress in an online course environment.

These differing capabilities must be considered by online faculty. In an online environment, these types of nuances significantly influence not only an individual student but the class culture. In public relations, for example, we often have many team-based and group activities (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017). While group or team-based activities is always challenging for groups, in an online environment it can prove even more complex. It is easy for an educator to not see this issue for group-learning if consistent and regular communication is not designed as a key component to the course.

In light of the need for sound assessment practices and multi-levels, regular and substantive communication practices, careful attention should be given to course sizes. There are many factors institutions face when determining course sizes. The administration has the responsibility of ensuring that courses are financially feasible and profitable. This reality can cause courses to have significant numbers of students enrolling while unintentionally diminishing the quality of assessment (and thus, learning) to reducing if not removing substantive communication practices (D’Orio, 2017). Thus, once a threshold for profit and minimum enrollment requirements have been established, institutions should review what else is required to ensure not only profitability but effective learning occurs in each course.

One area that seems to influence perceptions, and the belief about whether students are getting personal communication and education, is class size. Scholars have engaged in various studies to examine the topic of online course enrollment. Taft et al. (2011) recommend a trifecta to determine optimal course sizes, including Bloom’s taxonomy, engagement, and assignments or inquiry models. Using these three factors, they recommend large courses have fewer than 30 students, medium courses have 16-30, and small courses have fewer than 15. Beyond the academy, outside organizations have recognized the importance of class

size on education quality. US News & World Report, for example, points out the relationship between class size and education, focusing on the student experience of personal presence and interaction with faculty (Best Colleges, n.d.; Quillen, 2015). There are models with much larger student enrollments, with some programs having 150 enrolled in a course (Haynie, 2014) – or other models such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which could have hundreds of students. Students also hold unique views of class size (Morrison, 2015). Thus, setting class sizes becomes quite complicated when incorporating financial realities and implications, faculty load and bandwidth, resources for programs or online courses, and qualified interaction providing substantive content for students.

Online education delivery of communication degrees is growing. A 2015 survey of 61 graduate communication degrees in the US found that only 11% indicated the use of online delivery mode, and just 10% indicated the use of a hybrid model (Quesenberry et al., 2015). By 2019 another survey found 53 fully online public relations and strategic communication master's programs in the US (Weissman et al., 2019). Additionally, a survey in the Commission on Public Relations Education Report found 53% of public relations educators now indicate their program offers online public relations courses, and 6% have an entirely online undergraduate degree (DiStaso, 2019).

While there is a significant body of research that addresses general best practices and standards for online education, the dramatic growth of online course delivery for both public relations undergraduate and graduate courses and degrees points toward a need for new research. The following research questions have yet to be explicitly addressed for public relations education.

RQ1: What are the perceptions of online learning methods among those who have taught and taken an online public relations course?

RQ2: What pedagogical practices are best suited for specific public

relations courses?

RQ3: What are effective communication practices within online public relations courses?

### **Method**

#### **Survey Respondents & Recruitment**

While research exists on particular pedagogical practices, primary research was conducted to learn more about particular perspectives related to courses recommended by the Commission on Public Relations Education. An online survey was disseminated in Spring 2019 by the primary researchers and key educational bodies to reach faculty and students. Requests to participate included liaison groups such as the Public Relations Divisions in the Association for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication, the International Communication Association, and the National Communication Association, as well as the Public Relations Society of America Educators Academy.

As indicated above, the survey used respondent-driven snowballing to recruit participants, seeking to only include those faculty who have taught or students who had taken an online public relations course. This approach was used so that those who responded would have tangible experience in mind as they considered the items on the survey, rather than including a wider sample that would be responding based on speculation or perceptions of an online learning course, without having had an actual online class experience in that learning environment. While the idea of snowball sampling has raised concerns with some scholars, due to the potential integration of a biased sample (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010), other scholars suggest that there is validity in this recruitment method for certain types of audiences. Using a snowball technique is useful when researchers need “referrals made by people who share or know others who present characteristics that are of research interest” for the study (Lopes et al., 1996, p. 1268). As this study sought to recruit



only public relations faculty or students who had participated in an online public relations course, snowball sampling allowed the above networks to connect people for the “identification of such populations requiring knowledge of insiders who can locate people willing to participate in the study,” (Lopes et al., 1996, p. 1268). In other words, snowball sampling allowed the researcher to connect with people who had knowledge about others that also participated in an online PR course. In addition, scholars argue that using snowballing as a technique does not immediately result in an uncontrolled method of data collection:

As with random sampling, the snowballing method is not as uncontrolled as its name implied. The researcher is deeply involved in developing and managing the origination and progress of the sample and seeks to ensure at all times that the chain of referrals remains within limitations that are relevant to the study. (Etikan et al., 2015, p. 1)

Thus, as a study designed to receive insight only from those who enrolled or taught a public relations course in an online environment, snowballing allowed for the identification and recruitment of this particular sample through the network of national PR educator affiliations.

There were 157 respondents, 51.9% faculty, and 48.1% students. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants as identified by the status in the academy. Of the participants who reported their age, the majority of participants were 18 to 24 years old (n=59, 37.6%), followed by 35 to 44 years old (n=30, 19.1%). The complete breakdown by age is in Table 2.

### **Instrument Design**

The survey instrument included core demographic information at the beginning, followed by multiple scale questions that examined perceptions of online learning pedagogical methods. The initial scale question asked participants to respond to 16 different pedagogical methods that they felt would be “most appropriate” to online learning. If

respondents marked any online learning method as one that “should never be used in online education,” then that option would not appear on future questions.

**Table 1**

*Breakdown of Participant Status and Title*

<b>Participant Status</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
Professor	19	12.1	13.9
Associate Professor	13	8.3	9.5
Assistant Professor	14	8.9	10.2
Instructor (Full-Time)	9	5.7	6.6
Adjunct	16	10.2	11.7
Freshman PR Student	5	3.2	3.6
Sophomore PR Student	11	7.0	8.0
Junior PR Student	22	14.0	16.1
Senior PR Student	20	12.7	14.6
Alumni from PR Program	8	5.1	5.8

**Table 2**

*Breakdown of Participant Ages*

<b>Participant Status</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>
18 to 24	59	37.6	43.1
25 to 34	10	6.4	7.3
35 to 44	30	19.1	21.9
45 to 54	18	11.5	13.1
55 to 64	11	7.0	6.0
65 to 74	9	5.7	6.6

Next, respondents were presented with a series of questions about the same methods relating to specific public relations courses. These courses were identified from requirements in the Commission on Public Relations Education (2018) standards and the leading courses in the curriculum. The courses included were: 1) Strategic public relations

planning (such as creating a campaign or initiative for a client); 2) Public relations writing; 3) Public relations research; 4) Public relations ethics; 5) Public relations principles; 6) Public relations theory; 7) Public relations management; 8) New technologies in public relations; 9) Internships.

For each course, respondents were asked to identify if they had previously taken or taught the course online. If they responded positively, they were then asked to identify which pedagogical methods were most suited to that topic in an online environment. If they responded that they had not taken or taught the course online, they were automatically advanced to the next course questions. This allowed for greater clarity in that respondents provided feedback on courses they had personally experienced in an online environment, giving precise insight on particular courses versus online education in general for public relations. Finally, a series of questions concluded the survey, which examined communication best-practices within a course between peers, between a faculty member and individual student, and a faculty member to the course as a whole. The section concluded with scale questions exploring the best practices for helping students succeed in assignments in an online environment.

### **Analysis**

#### **Participant Demographic and Base Experience Analysis**

An important differentiation in this was understanding the level and breadth of experience with online education. When asked how many courses they had taken online, the majority of students had taken 6+ ( $n = 20$ , 31.3%), followed by students who had taken 3 ( $n = 14$ , 21.9%) and those that had taken 4 courses ( $n = 12$ , 18.8%). The majority of faculty reported teaching more than 6+ courses ( $n = 49$ , 69.0%), with the next majority teaching 3 courses ( $n = 8$ , 11.3%). Of those who responded, 40% ( $n = 55$ ) reported being from a public institution, and 59.9% ( $n = 82$ ) reported being from a private institution. Nearly half ( $n = 67$ , 48.9%) reported being at a medium size (1,000-8,000) person institution, with

42.3% ( $n = 58$ ) reporting being at a large institution (8,000+), and only 8.8% ( $n = 12$ ) reporting being at a small institution (less than 1,000). The survey was released globally, and participants represented locations from the United States, Europe, Asia, Australia, and South America. The majority of respondents were from the United States, with only 9.41% ( $n = 13$ ) identifying as being from another geographic location.

### **Perceptions of Online Learning Methods in Public Relations Courses**

Respondents were asked to rank what they felt were the pedagogical methods most important to teaching or learning PR in an online environment. From this, respondents identified the top five pedagogical methods or tools as 1) writing assignments ( $n = 125$ ,  $M = 4.44$ ); 2) videos ( $n = 124$ ,  $M = 4.38$ ); 3) reading, such as blogs and articles ( $n = 125$ ,  $M = 4.30$ ); 4) messaging ( $n = 124$ ,  $M = 4.08$ ); and 5) discussion boards ( $n = 125$ ,  $M = 4.07$ ). In order to determine whether there is a difference in perception of the effectiveness of online educational pedagogy practices between faculty and students, the following analysis was performed using a T-test on each of the top methods:

Faculty will differ from students in perceptions of the appropriateness of writing as a pedagogical tool in online courses. The T-test was significant, revealing a higher mean among faculty than among students regarding the appropriateness of writing as a pedagogical tool: Faculty ( $n = 69$ ,  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) and students ( $n = 55$ ,  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .86$ ),  $t(82.00) = 5.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Faculty members will differ from students in their perceptions of the appropriateness of videos as a pedagogical tool in online courses. The T-test was significant, revealing a higher mean among faculty than among students regarding the appropriateness of videos as a pedagogical tool: Faculty ( $n = 69$ ,  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = .50$ ) and students ( $n = 55$ ,  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = .86$ ),  $t(82.00) = 5.50$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Faculty will differ from students in perceptions of the

appropriateness of reading as a pedagogical tool in online courses. The T-test was significant, revealing a higher mean among faculty than among students regarding the appropriateness of reading as a pedagogical tool: Faculty ( $n = 69, M = 4.70, SD = .58$ ) and students ( $n = 55, M = 3.80, SD = 1.04, t(79.73) = 5.71, p < .001$ ).

Faculty will differ from students in perceptions of the appropriateness of messaging as a pedagogical tool in online courses. The T-test was not found to be significant, even though the mean among students was higher compared to faculty regarding the appropriateness of messaging as a pedagogical tool: Faculty ( $n = 69, M = 4.03, SD = .90$ ) and students ( $n = 55, M = 4.16, SD = .83$ ),  $t(121) = -.851, p = .396$

Faculty will differ from students in perceptions of the appropriateness of discussion boards as a pedagogical tool in online courses. The T-test was significant, revealing a higher mean among faculty than among students regarding the appropriateness of discussion boards as a pedagogical tool: Faculty ( $n=69, M = 4.40, SD = .83$ ) and students ( $n= 55, M = 3.65, SD = 1.08$ ),  $t(99.33) = 4.19, p < .001$ .

### **Public Relations Course Specific Pedagogical Practices**

Respondents were asked to respond to the types of pedagogical approaches appropriate to particular courses. Only participants who had taken a course in the subject within an online environment were able to respond to that portion of the research instrument. While this reduced the number of respondents for various courses, it provided a more precise response in that the respondents had a tangible experience in mind as they reflected on the survey items rather than conjecturing about an experience with which they did not have familiarity. The courses were 1) Strategic Public Relations Planning ( $n = 53$ ); 2) Public Relations Writing ( $n = 46$ ); 3) Public Relations Research ( $n = 26$ ); 4) Public Relations Ethics ( $n = 13$ ); 5) Public Relations Principles ( $n = 41$ ); 6) Public Relations Theory ( $n = 21$ ); 7) Public Relations Management ( $n = 14$ ); 8) New Technologies in PR

( $n = 49$ ); and 9) Internships ( $n = 40$ ). One course that many participants mentioned having taken online but that was not included in this study was crisis communication. The following represent the overall analysis (faculty and students) in a particular course.

**Strategic Public Relations Planning.** The top recommendation for this course is to use writing assignments ( $M = 4.46$ ); followed by the use of discussion boards ( $M = 4.20$ ) presentations ( $M = 4.18$ ), readings ( $M = 4.18$ ) and case simulations ( $M = 4.12$ ).

**Public Relations Writing.** The highest recommendation was writing assignments ( $M = 4.78$ ), followed by readings ( $M = 4.49$ ), discussion boards ( $M = 4.02$ ), social media assignments ( $M = 3.98$ ), and textbooks ( $M = 3.86$ ).

**Public Relations Research.** The top pedagogical recommendation was the use of readings ( $M = 4.54$ ), closely followed by writing assignments ( $M = 4.5$ ), presentations ( $M = 4.14$ ), videos ( $M = 4.08$ ), and textbooks ( $M = 4.05$ ).

**Public Relations Ethics.** The top methodological tool was readings ( $M = 4.5$ ), followed by videos ( $M = 4.45$ ), writing assignments ( $M = 4.36$ ), discussion boards ( $M = 4.36$ ) and case simulations ( $M = 4.27$ ).

**Public Relations Principles.** The majority recommended the use of readings ( $M = 4.38$ ), followed by textbooks ( $M = 4.34$ ); videos ( $M = 4.33$ ), writing assignments ( $M = 4.32$ ); and discussion boards ( $M = 4.20$ ). Public Relations Theory. The top methodological recommendation was writing assignments ( $M = 4.7$ ), followed by reading ( $M = 4.65$ ), discussion boards ( $M = 4.4$ ), textbooks ( $M = 4.28$ ), and videos ( $M = 4.1$ ).

**PR Management.** The majority recommended writing assignments ( $M = 4.83$ ), followed by discussion boards ( $M = 4.75$ ), readings ( $M = 4.67$ ), case simulations ( $M = 4.5$ ), and videos ( $M = 4.42$ ).

**New Technology in Public Relations.** The top methodology recommended was social media assignments ( $M = 4.55$ ), followed by

videos ( $M = 4.16$ ), writing assignments ( $M = 4.16$ ), discussion boards ( $M = 3.96$ ) and case simulations ( $M = 3.87$ ).

**PR Internships.** While this course skewed much lower than others in terms of participants agreeing particular methodologies were helpful, the top recommendation was writing assignments ( $M = 3.46$ ), discussion boards ( $M = 3.38$ ), messaging ( $M = 3.24$ ), readings ( $M = 3.16$ ) and video conferencing ( $M = 2.75$ ).

A summary of the top pedagogical practices by course within an online learning modality is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Top Pedagogical Practices by Course Within an Online Learning Modality*

Course	1st Practice	2nd Practice	3rd Practice
PR Writing	Writing Assignments	Reading	Discussion Board
PR Research	Reading	Writing Assignments	Presentation
PR Ethics	Reading	Video	Writing Assignment
PR Principles	Reading	Textbook	Videos
PR Theory	Writing Assignments	Reading	Discussion Board
PR Management	Writing Assignments	Discussion Boards	Reading
New Tech in PR	SM Assignments	Video	Reading
PR Internship	Writing Assignments	Discussion Boards	Reading

### **Online Public Relations Course Communication Practices**

**Peer-to-Peer Communication.** Students and faculty were asked to identify the most important communication method among peers in a course to explore best practices and perceptions of communication within online courses. With the options of 1) discussion boards; 2) video conferences; 3) social media; 4) email; 5) group text messages, and 6) phone calls, the most recommended method was email ( $n = 111$ ,  $M = 4.25$ ,

$SD = .90$ ).

**Faculty to Individual Student Communication.** Using the same options as above, respondents identified that email was the best method for faculty-to-individual-student communication in online courses ( $n = 111$ ,  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = .58$ ).

**Faculty to Class Communication.** Using the same options as above, respondents identified that email was the best option for faculty-to-class communication ( $n = 104$ ,  $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = .60$ ).

**Table 4**

*Top Communication Practices by Type Within an Online Learning Modality*

Respondent Type	Communication	1st Practice	2nd Practice	3rd Practice	4th Practice	5th Practice	6th Practice
Faculty	Peer to Peer	Discussion Boards	Email	Group Text Message	Video Conference	Social Media	Phone Calls
Current Students	Peer to Peer	Email	Group Text Message	Discussion Boards	Social Media	Video Conference	Phone Calls
Faculty	Faculty to Individual Student	Email	Discussion Boards	Video Conference	Phone Call	Social Media	Group Text Message
Current Students	Faculty to Individual Student	Email	Video Conference	Discussion Boards	Social Media	Group Text Message	Phone Call
Faculty	Faculty to Class	Email	Discussion Boards	Video Conference	Social Media	Group Text Message	Phone Call
Current Students	Faculty to Class	Email	Video Conference	Discussion Board	Social Media	Group Text Message	Phone Call

### Success and Feedback for Assignments

**Assignment Feedback.** When asking what assignment feedback is most “significant to helping students learn and improve,” respondents were given the following options: 1) Graded rubrics; 2) Written feedback; 3) Audio feedback; 4) Video feedback; 5) A class announcement.

Respondents indicated that the most significant option would be written feedback ( $n = 104$ ,  $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = .56$ ). The second highest



recommendation was a graded rubric ( $n = 103, M = 4.31, SD = .90$ ). Particularly due to perceptions between educators compared to students related to feedback, a T-test was performed on each of the feedback methods to see if there were statistical differences between faculty and students. There were statistically significant differences between faculty ( $n = 64, M = 4.89, SD = .40$ ) and students ( $n = 40, M = 4.6, SD = .71$ ) related to the importance of written feedback  $t(56.01) = 3.49, p = .001$ . Similarly, there was statistically significant differences between faculty ( $n = 64, M = 4.56, SD = .66$ ) and students ( $n = 39, M = 3.90, SD = 1.07$ ) related to the importance of written feedback  $t(56.01) = 3.49, p = .001$ . In both instances, the faculty mean was higher than students.

**Table 5**

*Top Pedagogical Practices for Assignments on Online Learning Modality*

Respondent Type	Communication	1st Practice	2nd Practice	3rd Practice	4th Practice	5th Practice
Faculty	Assignment Feedback	Written Feedback	Graded Rubric	Class Announcement	Video Feedback	Audio Feedback
Current Students	Assignment Feedback	Written Feedback	Graded Rubric	Class Announcement	Audio Feedback	Video Feedback
Faculty	Assignment Success	Outlined Instructions	Rubric Used to Score Assignments	Example Projects	Common Questions Document	Group Video Conference to Ask Questions
Current Students	Assignment Success	Example Projects	Outlined Instructions	Rubric Used to Score Assignments	Common Questions Document	Group Video Conference to Ask Questions

**Success for Assignments.** Lastly, students were asked what communication would best position them for success in online learning, particularly focusing on assignments and communication before they complete the project. Respondents could select 1) examples of a project; 2) outlined instructions; 3) a rubric that will be used to score the project;

4) A “common questions” document”; and 5) a group video conference to ask questions. The highest response was “outlined instructions” ( $n = 104$ ,  $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 5.74$ ). This was followed by “a rubric that will be used to score the project” ( $n = 104$ ,  $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) and “examples of a project” ( $n = 104$ ,  $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = .71$ ). When comparing the two groups separately (students to faculty), there were differences noted. Students, when analyzed independently, identified “example projects” as the most significant way to prepare for success ( $n = 40$ ,  $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = .72$ ) and rated “outlined instructions” as the second most significant ( $n = 40$ ,  $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = .74$ ).

### Discussion

#### **RQ1: What are the perceptions of online learning methods among those who have taught and taken an online public relations course?**

To set the foundation for this study, the researchers first wanted to establish a benchmark for understanding the general perceptions of pedagogical practices among those engaged with online learning. One significant finding was that respondents indicated that the primary choice of pedagogy among both faculty and students for courses is writing assignments. While faculty and student respondents did provide statistically significant differences related to the perceptions held of online learning, there were commonalities among pedagogical preferences that are helpful to note. For example, perceptions of pedagogical approaches, such as using video, blogs, and articles, and digital engagement opportunities such as messaging/discussion boards, were top preferences among participants. This contrasts with some traditional pedagogical approaches, such as using a textbook, slideshows, and group projects.

This general finding helps lay a foundation for where educators and students align in their approach to online learning. These findings can help navigate some critical considerations due to the recent highlighting of student preparedness and equity in online education. For example, an

on-going conversation in some institutions has been the rising cost of textbooks and the disparity it creates among students who have a lower socio-economic background. However, this study indicates that educators and students find online articles, blogs, and resources as a stronger pedagogical approach than textbooks in some courses, though not in all. This could mean that, for particular classes and subject matters, faculty may want to opt for online resources as class reading versus a traditional textbook. Thus, this finding for online education may help both in focusing on developing more rigorous learning environments by using preferred approaches among the key stakeholders in online learning. In addition to general approaches for online learning, the researchers wanted to identify particular pedagogical and communication practices that would directly impact public relations education in an online environment.

**RQ2: What pedagogical practices are best suited for specific public relations courses?**

This study found that, while faculty and students hold perceptions of pedagogical approaches in online learning in general, there is a customization that is needed based on the particular discipline and course being taught. Even in the midst of a smaller sample size, as this study included only respondents who had direct experience with the course, there are helpful insights for the development and enhancement of online public relations education. For example, specific courses benefit from case studies and social media more than other courses may. This finding further supports the idea of avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches to online education. Just as in the traditional classroom, public relations faculty have adopted particular pedagogical approaches for topics (like ethics case studies and crisis PR simulations), the online environment needs to be equally customized.

While respondents continued to indicate writing assignments and reading (though not textbooks) as primary preferred pedagogical

approaches, it is noteworthy that the use of discussion boards and presentations were often not identified. Also, while the use of certain pedagogical practices, such as video conferencing, seems to be a growing expectation, respondents identified pedagogical practices that were more about content absorption (reading) and content mastery illustration (such as writing) as preferred approaches. This could be due to the perception that there is busy work created in online courses, potentially enforcing the perception that online courses are less valuable than traditional ones. Also, respondents identified particular approaches for courses, such as social media assignments, only being among the top five pedagogical approaches for a technology class or video conferencing only being selected in the internship course. This seems to indicate that faculty must carefully consider the learning outcomes and the direct connection to those outcomes for any activity or interaction embedded into online courses. Also, faculty should carefully evaluate whether specific components for courses are present because they are traditionally included (like a textbook or discussion board) or whether those elements are central to the learning for that topic.

While previous research addresses the topic of pedagogical methods in general, this study provides unique insight into perceptions related to core public relations courses. By applying these recommendations, faculty may be better able to cultivate a productive learning environment for students that is uniquely suited, not only to our discipline but also to the niche topic of the course.

**RQ3: What are effective communication practices within online public relations courses?**

Communication within a learning community contributes to learning outcomes, student retention, and student satisfaction. This study indicated that while online learning communities have many digital options, email seems to remain a preferred communication method to

bolster connections among peers, faculty, and the class as a whole. It could be that the automation of feedback and communication embedded into online courses gives the impression of a lack of intentionality – and thus, an email creates a feeling of immediacy and intention. This finding seems to indicate that purposefully integrating communication practices outside of the learning management system could be powerful for online courses. While communication is key for all courses, online faculty must consider how students perceive the communication and then create opportunities for OCC that feel authentic to students rather than merely an extension of what faculty have to do as part of a class.

Additionally, when it comes to communicating about assignments, respondents indicated a preference for customized feedback that is written. While online learning has developed a seamlessly integrated rubric option, the potential for learning based on qualitative feedback seems to be the most preferred method. These two findings, related to OCC and individual assignment feedback, are particularly noteworthy when administrators and faculty consider the overall construct of an online faculty member. In a traditional course, faculty can individually interact with students as they walk into class, perhaps as they pass on campus or when they come into the office. These all give opportunities for OCC to occur very naturally and without much additional time. Also, in a traditional course, faculty can provide feedback to the class as a whole with everyone in the room while also highlighting and noting particular elements for student work. However, in online learning, OCC and assignment feedback takes on a different form. It all requires much more individualization and purposeful investment. Thus, online educators should anticipate courses taking longer than a traditional course, not because the infrastructure is created each time anew, but because individual communication requires so much each time the course is run. While this is a challenge that faculty need to recognize, and administration should consider for faculty load and

obligations, it is also a value-proposition for students that could position online learning in a more positive light. While there are criticisms of online learning being lesser compared to traditional, the respondents seem to indicate that the investment of intentional, customized communication represents an opportunity to create a differential that students would find attractive and appealing for an educational choice.

Lastly, to prepare ahead of time, faculty and students recommend examples of projects, rubrics, and outlined instructions. This allows a more on-demand opportunity for students to understand the expectations and how the outcomes will be evaluated on various projects. Unlike the above finding related to communication, the focus on developing examples, rubrics, and outlined instructions is one that faculty can prepare prior to the course launching. Then, the faculty are able to benefit throughout the term and in future terms as the course runs again. While faculty and students differ in the order of importance for particular pedagogical approaches or assignments, these areas remain the most significant in the perception of both parties to yield the best success within an online course.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One limitation of this study was the respondent size for the course-specific analysis. In light of this, the findings are challenging to generalize to a larger population due to the limited number of responses. However, future studies would be able to build on these initial findings and further examine the results to verify if they continue to be supported with a higher number of respondents. In addition, in light of COVID-19, more faculty and students will now be able to respond to studies such as this with personal experience, given the volume of individuals who participated in online education during the pandemic. Future research would benefit from examining how this experience has now shaped perceptions and communication practices within public relations courses, particularly as

some courses were infrequently (if ever) offered in an online format prior to the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on exploring the learning practices through digital learning amongst students and faculty in public relations. Online teaching will continue to grow and will be an essential skill faculty need to possess moving forward in higher education. In light of COVID-19, more instructors have been asked to bring their courses online immediately to address the needs of their respective institutions. Future research could explore the role of digital learning practices in a crisis and how students and faculty perceive their challenges and opportunities together. Also, future research could explore the new necessary skills and areas within digital learning which students need to possess when they enter the industry. Hosting webinars, moderating conference calls, promoting online digital summits, and more are just some of the new potential online assignments that need to be tested, evaluated, and discussed in digital learning research.

With the rapid and expected continual growth of digital learning, the future of public relations education will be significantly impacted by the standards and practices established by institutions. Focusing on appropriate faculty development, essential resources, effective assessment, and strategic pedagogical practices throughout the curriculum are key methods for programs to ensure effective learning environments.

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