

Teaching Brief

PR Ethics: An Interactive Adventure

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Rationale

The 2018 Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) report *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State. Educators and Practitioners* recommends that all public relations programs require an ethics course in their curriculum. To prepare students for ethical challenges they may face in the profession, the CPRE report also recommended that “ethics lessons and courses should incorporate moral philosophy, case studies, and simulations to be the most effective” (p. 68). It further recommends that “using classical ethical knowledge and applying it critically to modern public relations challenges will equip future practitioners to thrive in an environment of fake news, high levels of mistrust, management scandals, and public scrutiny of information sources” (p. 68).

Inspired by the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of the ‘80s and ‘90s, “PR Ethics: An Interactive Adventure” asks students to develop a web-based interactive story based on a PR ethics case study. Students choose one ethics case study from PRSA to adapt into an interactive narrative using Typeform’s interactive fiction template. Once they have completed their interactive story, they will deliver a presentation

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that applies their work to the PRSA Code of Ethics, the Page Principles, and the theory of Utilitarianism.

Through this assignment, students are put in the position of imagining a (real life or fictionalized) scenario, identifying ethical dilemmas, making clear decisions, and planning for a variety of outcomes and conclusions. Through the creation of an interactive story, students identify choices that lead to different outcomes, applying logic and predictive decision making to identify consequences of action or inaction, and make connections between theory and practice.

“PR Ethics: An Interactive Adventure” is an easily adaptable activity for ethics courses that provides a framework for the discussion and/or analysis of any of the following topics: codes of ethics, crisis and ethics, digital ethics, transparency, corporate social responsibility, diversity, ethical cultures, writing and ethics, global ethics, and more. This assignment can be made to fit any PR course by changing the topic of the case study and adding topic-specific assigned readings. This assignment can be done individually or as a group and is suitable for online or face-to-face course instruction.

Student Learning Outcomes

Note: most outcomes correspond with those found in the *CPRE Ethics Education Report* (Bortree et al., 2019).

- Identify ethical issues in communication situations.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the major ethical approaches that affect moral decision making by organizations as well as the role of public relations professionals in shaping those decisions.
- Analyze the conflicting duties and loyalties in ethical issues that public relations practitioners and organizational leaders confront.
- Construct written and oral arguments explaining particular ethical choices.
- Develop critical thinking and analytical problem-solving skills

to address ethical issues using ethical decision models.

- Understand the broader impact of ethical decision making.
- Familiarize students with the PRSA Code of Ethics, Page Principles, and ethical guidelines to aid in decision making.

Connection to Public Relations Practice

In our ever-changing media landscape, public relations practitioners face ethical challenges and dilemmas daily. CPRE's 2018 report states:

Public relations practitioners and students need to be prepared to address a range of ethical issues including transparency, truthfulness, digital ethics, and decision-making. Greater education on ethics and a model to help with ethical decision-making will help prepare the next generation to work in an environment that does not always value truth. Students need to be vigilant about information they consume as well as information they create and disseminate. This is the role of public relations education. (p. 66)

Data from the report also suggest that both educators and practitioners identify ethics knowledge as critical for new practitioners (CPRE, 2018).

This assignment connects ethical frameworks (Utilitarianism) and professional codes of ethics (PRSA Code of Ethics and the Page Principles) to real-life public relations practices.

Assessment

Student learning will be assessed using the rubric below.

An Interactive Ethics Adventure and Presentation Rubric

Name:

Case:

| | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
|--|-----------|---|---|---|-------------|
| Story identifies the ethical issue(s), internal/external factors, and stakeholder groups that would be impacted by the case and includes them throughout the story. | | | | | |
| Story includes scenarios that are realistic and based on different ethics-based decisions. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Story is based competently on information, ideas, or insights from the textbook, ethical theories, PRSA Code of Ethics, Page Principles, and PRSA's Ethical Decision-Making Guide. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Story is realistic, logically organized, and clear. The story makes sense and is easy to follow. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Story includes at least 20 decisions to guide decision-making. Scenarios contain choices that illustrate the different ethical sides. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Presentation: did not read notes, appeared confident, clearly prepared, and practiced ahead of time. Knowledgeable about the case and spoke the full time. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Presentation accurately identifies and explains all PRSA Member Code of Professional Values, PRSA Code Provisions of Conduct, and Page Principles that apply to the story. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------|---|---|---|-------------|
| Presentation accurately identifies and analyzes the conflicting duties and loyalties confronted by public relations practitioners and organizational leaders in ethical situations. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Presentation accurately explains how ethical frameworks (Utilitarianism and PRSA Ethical Decision-Making Guide) were used to create the story. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |
| Presentation contains a solid argument for the most ethical decisions and describes in detail five key take-aways learned about applied public relations ethics and ethical decision making in the creation of the story. | 1 Weak | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 Strong |

Total Points: /50

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

This assignment was created to align with the stated learning goals found in the *Ethics Education Report* (Bortree et al., 2019). Outcomes will be evaluated following deployment of the assignment in the fall.

I expect students to report that this assignment helped them develop critical thinking and analytical problem-solving skills to address ethical issues and that it helped them understand the broader impact of ethical decision making. My expectation is that students will successfully identify ethical issues in communication situations, but may fail to recognize the more nuanced ethical complexities of professional life due to lack of experience.

I expect students will demonstrate an understanding of the major ethical approaches that affect moral decision making by organizations as

well as the role of public relations professionals in shaping those decisions through the creation of this assignment and corresponding presentation, which will help them construct written and oral arguments explaining particular ethical choices.

Students may struggle to analyze the conflicting duties and loyalties in ethical issues that public relations practitioners and organizational leaders confront, again because they lack experience in the professional field. They may also have trouble discerning between an ethical dilemma and a legal issue.

References

- Bortree, D., Bowen, S. A., Gower, K., Larsen, N., Neill, M., Silverman, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2019). *Ethics Education Report*. Commission on Public Relations Education. <http://www.commissionpred.org/ethics-education-report-10-14-19/>.
- Commission on Public Relations Education. (2018). *Fast forward: Foundations + future state. Educators + practitioners: The Commission on Public Relations Education 2017 report on undergraduate education*. <http://www.commissionpred.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/report6-full.pdf>

Appendix

Assignment: *PR Ethics: An Interactive Adventure*

Inspired by the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* books of the ‘80s and ‘90s, you are asked to develop a web-based interactive story based on a PR ethics case study. You will choose one ethics case study from PRSA to adapt into an interactive narrative using Typeform’s interactive fiction template. Once you have completed your interactive story, you will deliver

a presentation that applies your work to the PRSA Code of Ethics, the Page Principles, and the theory of Utilitarianism.

This assignment asks you to imagine a scenario, identify ethical dilemmas, make clear decisions, and plan for a variety of outcomes and conclusions. Through the creation of your interactive story, you will identify choices that lead to different outcomes, apply logic and predictive decision making to identify consequences of action (or inaction), and make connections between theory and practice.

Directions:

1. Read:
 - “Ethics and Law in Public Relations” (Chapter 3), from *Introduction to Strategic Public Relations* (Page & Parnell, 2018)
 - PRSA Code of Ethics
 - Page Principles
 - PRSA’s Ethical Decision-Making Guide
2. Choose one PRSA ethics case study: <https://www.prsa.org/about/ethics>
(Note to instructor: alternatively, students can be provided with real PR cases like Tylenol, BP oil spill, etc.).
3. Use PRSA’s Ethical Decision-Making guide as a springboard to identify the ethical issue(s), internal/external factors, and stakeholder groups that would be impacted by your case. Brainstorm scenarios that could take place based on different ethics-based decisions. https://www.prsa.org/docs/default-source/about/ethics/ethics-case-studies/ethics-case-study-ethical-desision-making-guide.pdf?sfvrsn=8a55268f_4
4. Using Typeform’s Interactive Fiction template, create an interactive story based on your case. You must include at least 20 decisions as part of your story. <https://www.typeform.com/templates/t/interactive-fiction/>

5. Once your story is complete, you will create and deliver a presentation that applies your work to the PRSA Code of Ethics, the Page Principles, and the theory of Utilitarianism found in Chapter 3. Your presentation must be at least 10 minutes long and should directly identify the following:

- All PRSA Member Code of Professional Values that apply to your story
- All PRSA Code Provisions of Conduct that apply to your story
- All Page Principles that apply to your story
- How you used ethical frameworks (Utilitarianism and PRSA Ethical Decision-Making Guide) to create your story
- What you learned about ethics and ethical decision making in the creation of your story

Sample: Screenshots of the beginning of an interactive story using Typeform.com based on a PRSA ethics case study can be seen at: <https://www.arienrozelle.com/teaching-resources>