TEACHING BRIEF

Crisis Response Plan Group Project

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ABSTRACT

This project allows students to take an important chapter from the course text and apply it to a real-world situation: they create and respond to a hypothetical crisis, based on the information discussed in class and in the text. In doing so, they utilize information literacy, critical thinking, and other analytical skills. Learning objectives, steps and procedures, and assessment information are discussed.

Keywords: bloom's taxonomy, group project, crisis communication, crisis response, crisis management

Textbooks and case studies can only take students so far in mass communication curricula; the best learning involves experience and application. This may be especially the case for public relations education. While traditional textbook knowledge is important, particularly for beginning PR students, helping those students see the information played out in reality is a great way to ensure actual learning has taken place, rather than simple exposure or memorization. Kolb's (1984) work on Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) posits that learning is a process where knowledge is acquired by experiences. According to this theory, knowledge obtained from successful experiential learning is cyclical, "where the learner 'touches all the bases'—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Nilson (2016) also provides researched-based findings to help understand how students learn best, and suggests that true learning can be achieved by "thinking about the meaning of the new knowledge and connecting it to what [students] already know; …interaction with others; …actively engag[ing] in an activity; …receiv[ing] the new material multiple times but in different ways; …[and] making and correcting mistakes [rather than] being correct in the first place" (Nilson 2016, pp. 4-5).

One subject area that fits naturally with experiential learning methods is crisis management, which is an important part of the overall public relations curriculum. Well-known crisis management researcher and theorist Timothy Coombs (2001) stated that:

> crisis management moves the public relations role to the managerial function and requires the development of many skills and knowledge points… the need for crisis management in practice increases each year as the technology and stakeholders continue to create new crises and pressure how organizations should respond to crises. (p.89)

The internationally recognized accreditation program for public relations practitioners, Accreditation in Public Relations (APR), stresses crisis and issues management as 15% of the knowledge, skills, and abilities tested as part of the examination process (Universal Accreditation Board, 2021). Further, after in-depth interviews with 29 advertising and public relations agency leaders, Neill and Schauster (2015) reported that the necessity of crisis and issues management skills for undergraduates was emphasized 70 different times by 25 of the participants.

The activity described here was designed to foster the learning of crisis management and communication by utilizing an experiential learning method that helps students engage in their own learning, interact with others, and actively, critically think about the material. This project allows students to take an important chapter from the course text and apply it to a real-world situation: they create and respond to a hypothetical crisis, based on the information discussed in class and in the text. In doing so, they utilize information literacy, critical thinking, and other analytical skills.

This project is designed as the second of two main assignments for an introductory public relations class. The first assignment involves cold-calling and interviewing a public relations practitioner who has been in the industry a minimum of five years, and writing and presenting a report about the information learned in that interview. That assignment helps students to understand clearly what public relations is and that a practitioner needs to be knowledgeable of and skillful in an array of areas. Typically, the students in the class are sophomores or juniors who will be starting their PR practicum sequence in the next academic year. This class is their first introduction to the profession, but this assignment takes place in the second half of the semester after learning and being initially assessed on the material needed to complete the assignment.

Learning Objectives

This activity enables students to demonstrate knowledge and application of every step in the crisis management lifecycle, as discussed in class and in the assigned text: chapter 10 of Wilcox et al.'s (2015) *Public Relations: Strategies & Tactics*. Wilcox et al.'s (2015) approach to crisis management involves a lifecycle, where a potential crisis is first identified in the proactive stage, developing crises are planned for in the strategic phase, full-blown crises are responded to in the reactive stage, and reputation damage is assessed and addressed in the recovery stage. The reactive and recovery stages also include applying Benoit's (1995) image restoration strategies.

Students are able to master this new-to-them material through an assignment that caters to a variety of learning styles and applies multiple categories of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, et al., 1956). Therefore, this activity is designed to achieve six learning objectives (LO):

1. Explain the role public relations plays in responding to a crisis.
2. Explain the four phases of the conflict management life cycle.
3. Identify and research issues facing an organization that require attention or that could lead to a crisis situation.
4. Identify important steps to deal with a crisis as it occurs.
5. Design a crisis communication response plan.
6. Present your plan and defend your decisions.

The Activity: Steps and Procedures

The students are first divided into groups of roughly equal numbers. The instructor should be the one to assign students to groups, making sure each group contains students of mixed-ability and is as diverse as possible. Each group is instructed to choose a company or organization that most group members are already perfunctorily familiar

with, and pretend that they are the public relations department for that organization. As the PR department for their chosen company, each group is tasked with crisis response: they are to anticipate any issues that might turn into crises for their organization and be prepared to respond to crises that occur. Together, each group is to:

1. Choose an organization to "work" for and research that chosen company.

2. Analyze the company's current situation, based on the research collected. This involves writing a basic situation analysis, including an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT).

3. Scan the environment of the company and industry to identify potential issues that could develop into crises for the organization.

4. Choose one of the issues identified, and envision how that issue could develop into a crisis that could plausibly impact the organization. This step involves designing and describing a particular crisis in detail.

5. Develop a specific crisis communication plan to respond to the designed crisis.

6. Present the research, designed crisis, and crisis response plan to the class.

With this activity, students are able to "produce new or original work," the pinnacle of Bloom's taxonomy, but it also requires them to work their way through each of the proceeding categories (Bloom, et al., 1956). In addition, the collaborative effort of the group work component contributes to the educational process. "The research on the effects of group learning has focused on several variables—achievement/ productivity (learning), positive attitudes and ethics, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and psychological health—and group work enhances all of them for students at all educational levels and of all backgrounds" (Nilson, 2016, p. 180).

Assessment

Students are instructed that this project will result in a 5-10-page paper that should include the information described below, which also serves as the grading rubric for the paper. Each section of the paper corresponds to one of the stages in the crisis management lifecycle as presented in the assigned text (Wilcox et al., 2015). In addition, each group will also present their research, designed crisis and crisis response plan. The presentations should be 10 minutes, involve every member of the group, and include a visual aid. An additional 30-point value is added to the final paper grade for the presentation.

1. *Company information and background (10%):*

At a minimum, this section should answer: What is the company; what do they do; what services or products do they provide; how many employees and locations do they have? Have they ever faced any major crises? If so, what was their response or the result? This section should also include a SWOT analysis and any other background information deemed relevant.

2. *Environmental scan (Proactive Phase; 10%):*

Identify emerging trends, concerns, or issues—both within the organization, within the larger industry, or within society—likely to affect the organization in the next few years. Predict problems and anticipate threats to the company. This involves the reading, listening, and watching of current affairs with an eye to the organization's interests. Identify and describe at least five issues with the most potential to develop into crises for the organization. Why were those issues selected? What makes them the most likely to cause a crisis?

3. *Crisis (15%):*

Choose one of the issues identified in the environmental scan to develop into a full-blown crisis. Consider all possible factors about that crisis. Every detail about it is up to the group to design: What is it? Where

did it start? Who does it involve? What level of blame could be accurately placed upon the company? How long does the crisis last? Does the media make the crisis public before the company is able to? etc.

4. Crisis Response Plan (Strategic and Reactive Phases; 25%):

Design the crisis management and communication plan for the crisis described in the previous section. At a minimum, this section should answer: What are the main messages? Who are the spokespeople and what employees will be made available for comment? What/where is the media headquarters? What main crisis response strategy and image restoration strategy should be employed (denial, excuse, justification, etc.)? Explain the reasoning behind every decision (why were those choices made regarding messages, strategy, spokespeople, etc.).

5. Conclusion (Recovery Phase; 10%):

What is the final result? What is the anticipated result if the company followed the crisis response plan exactly as designed? What next steps should be taken once the crisis is over?

Evidence of Student Learning

Working with a group to identify issues, create a crisis and respond to that crisis provides a cooperative learning experience, similar to the "think, share, pair" method that Nilson (2016) has found to be a particularly effective learning style. It also helps ensure that students have not simply learned the material in a way that allows them to just answer a question, but to reason with the material and fully apply it to real life scenarios. All of this is enabling the students to move through Bloom's Taxonomy in a demonstrable way.

In practice, I've found that students tend to split up the major sections of this paper and work independently on those sections. Most of the collaboration happens in the beginning, while choosing the company and the design of and response to the crisis, and at the end, in planning the presentation. Allowing some class time for work on this project allows

me to monitor each individual's contribution to the project and the overall group dynamic, answer any major questions groups may encounter, and ensure each group completes the assignment correctly.

Linked below are examples of papers that were submitted during the spring 2021 semester, based on the assignment instructions. Please note that these examples have been linked in their originally-submitted form, without any comments or grading information, and are shared with student permission.

[Student Example 1: Chick-fil-A](#)

[Student Example 2: American Eagle Outfitters](#)

During the spring 2021 semester, I administered a volunteer survey to gauge reactions to this project. One-third of the students in this class participated in the research and answered questions about their experience with this project using a Likert-type scale. The questions and their responses are presented in table 1. While this represents an extremely small sample, it does provide some indication of students' perspectives of this project. Overall, during this semester, the students who responded enjoyed the project, did not find it too easy or overly difficult, self-reported gaining a better understanding of the material, and overwhelmingly understood the instructions and assignment expectations. Unsurprisingly, the group work aspect of the assignment drew mixed reviews.

An additional, open-ended question regarding the group dynamic was also included, which allowed students the opportunity to relay any serious concerns about their groups or particular individuals. I also regularly encourage students to inform me if there is major group discord or work disparity, so those issues can be assuaged before the project is due.

Table 1

Student Feedback

Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
How difficult was this assignment? (0=easy; 10=hardest project ever)	2	6	4.5	1.8
How much did you enjoy this assignment? (0=worst project ever; 10=most fun school assignment ever)	3	9	6.33	1.8
How much did this project help you better grasp the crisis management material? (0=no difference; 10=I understand so much better now.)	5	10	8	1.91
How clear were the instructions? (0=I had no idea what to do; 10=I knew exactly what to do.)	9	10	9.83	0.37
How clear were the expectations for this assignment? (0=I had no idea what I would be graded on; 10=I knew exactly what the final result would be.)	8	10	9.5	0.76
How was the group work aspect of this project? (0=I would have preferred to do this alone; 10=I loved my group!)	0	10	5.6	3.88

Conclusion

Crisis management abilities are necessary for success in public relations practice, and experiential learning techniques, such as the project described above, can help students thoroughly learn this important topic. By being introduced to this information early in their academic careers in a way that helps foster real learning through engagement and critical thinking, students can become proficient in this subject, leading to greater success in senior-level classrooms and, eventually, in the workforce.

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