

## **Public Interest Communications in the Classroom: Bringing Activism to Public Relations Education (Teaching Activism in the Public Relations Classroom)**

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### ABSTRACT

Public interest communications, an emerging field that implements strategic communications in an effort to drive sustainable social change that advances the human condition, provides an opportunity to create a foundation to incorporate activism in the public relations classroom. This paper highlights why a PIC curriculum is ideal for Generation Z students given their desire to make an impact and utilize technology in meaningful ways. In addition, this paper outlines a possible PIC curriculum that aligns with current public relations standards while discussing the field's interdisciplinary benefits. Public Interest Communications offers a skillset for future activists.

*Keywords:* curriculum development, critical pedagogy, public interest communications, activism, ethics

On February 14, 2018, people were notified of yet another mass school shooting in Parkland, Florida. As always, there were “thoughts and prayers” Tweets that followed the event. Pundits along with ordinary citizens assumed that the media attention and calls for gun reform would die down after a week. However, the student survivors of the Parkland shooting, high school students who had just experienced a profound tragedy, mobilized and started the March for Our Lives Movement (Jones, 2018). These young activists were not alone. Their peers began environmental organizations and collectives such as the Sunrise Movement and young activists also became involved with Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020. These same young activists are now sitting in university classrooms eager to engage with social causes. While public interest communication (PIC) is still an emerging field, it offers a flexibility that has the potential to engage a new generation of public relations students and to incorporate existing fields of study in an interdisciplinary manner.

Although the concepts and theories within PIC are still being explored, the most common definition is “the development and implementation of science-based strategic communications with the goal of significant and sustained positive behavior change or action on an issue that transcends the particular objectives of any single organization” (Christiano & Neimand, 2017a, p. 38; Fessmann, 2016). PIC also focuses on human rights and “communication that advances the human condition” (Hon, 2016, para 1).

As such, this emerging field presents a unique opportunity to integrate activism into public relations curriculum. Most public relations curricula are typically aligned with corporate structures and founders such as Edward Bernays; however, campaigns like the early labor movement also utilized many of the same skill sets taught in foundational public relations courses, yet receive little mention (Ciszek, 2015; Pomper, 1959).

Journalism and public relations are both areas that teach students essential skills they will need to be successful in the industry. However, PIC has the potential to teach students the skills necessary to be an activist. Currently, classes that are taught about activism tend to focus more on theory. Students learn about collective action (see Olson, 1965) and the importance of community-based social networks (see Tilly, 1978), but learn very little about how to apply these skills. Subsequently, public relations courses offer a variety of skills-based courses, with minimal emphasis on activist movements. Introducing PIC as a class in an existing PR program or as part of a larger, more focused curriculum provides today's students with a skillset that will teach them to be impactful activists.

The aim of this article is to introduce PIC as a new area of study similar to the initiatives established by feminist scholars in the 1970s as they attempted to introduce Women's Studies as a distinct academic and scholarly topic. Today, many universities have gender and women's studies programs. We are not introducing new theories or data; instead, we are trying to introduce a new area of study that, while related to current programs of study such as public relations, offers something different—something essential to the betterment of our educational institutions and our society. This article thus examines why the behaviors of this current generation provide a strong foundation for the introduction of PIC; PIC's unique characteristics and how these features can enhance current curricula by introducing an activist skill set; and how practitioners and scholars can implement past models of curriculum development to build PIC as an important area of study. In addition, we will also provide suggestions for how PIC can be incorporated into existing PR curricula based on CPRE guidelines and offer syllabi and program recommendations based on an analysis of currently available PIC syllabi and programs of study.

### **Important Role of Generation Z**

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the group of students most likely to be found in today's college classroom. Gen Z follows the Millennial generation and is defined as those born between 1997 and 2012 by the Pew Center (see Dimock, 2019). Others define the generation as starting in 1995 and ending in 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). While we recognize that using terms like Gen Z has the potential to stereotype a diverse group of people, it is still common practice among researchers and to organize generations based on birth year and shared characteristics (Wang & Peng, 2015). Gen Z makes up roughly 20% of the entire current U.S. population (Frey, 2020) and is considered the most diverse generation yet. This group is said to be very accepting of diversity and inclusion (Canvas Blue, 2018; Robinson, 2018). Gen Z members aged 18 to 21 are more likely to attend college than their Millennial or Gen X counterparts (Parker & Igielinik, 2020). Members of Gen Z are also the population who will make up the cohort of traditional-aged college students for the next decade and a half (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019). They have been profoundly affected by the wars, financial ups and downs, terrorism, school shootings, social causes, and social media that have been ever-present in their lives (Adamy, 2018). Often these concerns have manifested as forms of activism for members of this generation as discussed earlier in this piece.

The connectivity afforded by social media has made their world smaller. Gen Z has been heavily influenced by technology and globalization (Abdullah, et al., 2018) because both factors have been a part of their worlds since day one. They have always had technology and information at their fingertips (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018; Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Some even say this generation uses their digital and tech savvy to recreate what activism is and drive change; as one Gen Z member said, "At the click of a button, we can start a movement" (Ziad Ahmed as cited in Cohen, 2020). Members of Gen Z use social media

such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok to find their communities, to share their thoughts, and to organize (MacColl, 2019). In other words, members of Gen Z use social media to be activists. While some may dismiss these efforts as clickivism, defined by Oxford Language as, “the practice of supporting a political or social cause via the internet by means such as social media or online petitions, typically characterized as involving little effort or commitment” (n.d., para. 1), social media are important ways for people to organize around the causes about which they care (MacColl, 2019).

Youth-led activism is not a new phenomenon. In the 1960s, high school and college-aged students often led the charge for civil rights. In the 1970s, youth advocated for women’s rights and protested against the Vietnam War. Some even say the punk movement of the 1970s was a form of youth-led activism against the status quo (Pekacz, 1994). In more recent times, youth have been involved in the DREAM act, gay-straight alliances, the #BLM movement, addressing climate change, and the movement to end sexual assault.

A campus is often an important place for youth-led activism because students have greater proximity to each other due to dorm and apartment living; they also have down time between classes in which they discuss and engage with one another (Enriquez, 2014; Van Dyke, 1998; Zhao, 1998). College is also often a transformative and transitional time for many students which brings about changes in their routines, and peers and affords the opportunity to explore activism (Munson, 2010). In addition, students in college are typically unmarried, childless, and often do not have jobs making it easier to participate in activism because they have fewer obligations (McAdam, 1998; Earl et al., 2017). Although some may argue today’s youth are not as involved as those of the past (See Delli Carpini, 2000), others say these notions are incorrect (See Henn et al., 2002; Strama, 1998) and the ways in which youth choose to be active

has changed. “Just as the student activists of the 1960s were concerned with the issues that had a direct (negative) effect on their lives, so are today’s young activists. And just as their predecessors had used the media available to them to further their cause, so too do today’s young activists” (Teruelle, 2011, p. 204). While Gen Z may not rely as much on traditional media for their activism, they are still activists. They just choose to use social media because it is familiar to them. In this process, this generation is redefining what activism can look like.

The causes about which Gen Z cares about are many. Gen Z is known to advocate for fairness and equal treatment for all; other issues of importance to this generation include healthcare, mental health, higher education, economic security, civic engagement, race equity, and the environment (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). Gay marriage, climate change, and gender identity are also issues this generation is more likely to support than other generations (Biedermen, et al., 2020). Another description of significance is that this generation is very we-centric rather than me-centric (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016) meaning that Gen Z thinks about others and wants to better society for all.

Irregular Labs, a learning network and innovation lab that helps its clients connect with Gen Z, conducted a study of 2,013 members of Gen Z worldwide. From this study, it was learned that close to 75% of the respondents, not only believed being politically and socially engaged was important to their identities, but they also believed such engagement was the hallmark of a good citizen (Irregular Labs, 2019). These findings seem to suggest PIC might be an area of great interest to today’s college students. Whether it is hyper-local activism such as the student-organized Bucks Students for Climate Action and Protection of the Environment whose members raised money, took part in forums, and initiated climate strikes (Biederman, et al., 2020) and the graduation speech given by Paxton Smith, a Dallas-area valedictorian, who spoke out against the new

Texas heartbeat ban law (Zdanowicz & Johnson, 2021), or activism on a national or international level such as March for Our Lives or the Sunshine Movement, Gen Z is talking more, seeing more, and doing more about issues such as climate change than the older generations (Tyson, et al., 2021). Members of Gen Z are not afraid to call out what they see as unfair, and they are not afraid to drive change. While most people know the work of Greta Thurnberg, it should be noted that Gen Z people of color, such as Mari Copeny who has fought for clean water in Flint, Michigan; Amelia Telford who works against global heating and fossil fuels in Australia; and Elizabeth Gulugulu who has put a focus on climate issues in Zimbabwe, have sustained such movements (Clauson-Wolf, 2021).

Gen Z wants to be more involved with and participate in political, social justice, and humanitarian causes beyond clicktivism, “they just need to know how” (MacColl, 2019, para. 4). It is with the ability to explain the hows of activism, social justice, and advocacy along with preparing students with a skill set for how to be activists and advocates that a PIC curriculum could strongly connect with members of Gen Z. Perhaps the time has come for educators to disrupt how communication fields are taught so students have options beyond a curriculum that is corporately focused.

### **Public Interest Communications’ Role in the PR Classroom**

For public relations programs seeking to introduce an activist toolkit, PIC has the potential to provide a framework for PR professors to still teach essential industry skills while providing a curriculum more suitable for Gen Z learners and future activists. While the overall aim is to build PIC as a unique field of study, PIC was initially introduced within PR and communication classrooms, and still serves an important function as either a unit in an ethics course or as a special topic for PR and journalism majors interested in social change (Fessmann, 2017; Fessmann, 2018a; Fessmann, 2018b).

In addition, PIC frameworks highlight six spheres through which strategic communication could drive change using PIC tactics: media; policy, communities of influence, the market, activism, and behavior change marketing (Christiano, 2017). While activism is only one of the spheres mentioned, an understanding of all six spheres opens the possibility to create a more sustainable platform to drive change and gives students an opportunity to explore a variety of interests and disciplines. As noted previously, this generation of students is adept at utilizing social media; this PIC framework gives Gen Z students multiple avenues to utilize the technologies they grew up with in ways that can create meaningful change for everyone, while still sitting in a classroom. Essentially, these spheres help to provide future activists with a toolkit as they enter society beyond the classroom. Public relations teaches students valuable skills that have been successfully used to promote various brands; however, these same tools can also be used to create a better, more inclusive world (see Weibe, 1951; and Hon's (1997) work on how public relations tactics were utilized during the Civil Rights Movement). Creating this better and more inclusive environment is what PIC aims to do, and as such, PIC offers a valuable outlet to introduce social justice into the PR classroom.

As the notion of introducing activism into public relations classrooms becomes more widely discussed (Mules, 2021), PIC has the opportunity to bridge the divide among professors more interested in the functionalist approach, a pedagogical theory that teaches students skill sets that will later benefit the entirety of society, and those more entrenched in activism or critical cultural studies. PIC provides a framework for sustainable social change and provides a new lexicon for those who may want to explore activism in the PR classroom, but fear the stigmatization of such terms. Similar to traditional journalism and public relations, PIC has a theoretical foundation; however, PIC, like the other



two fields, should also teach students necessary skills. Functionalists, those who wish for a field to remain neutral, tend to use case studies and corporate structures. In contrast, activists, and professors with critical cultural backgrounds, tend to problematize these structures as sites of oppression (Ciszek, 2015). Given these tensions, creating a space where both of these ideas are welcome within the public relations curricula has proven difficult. PIC has the ability to create a space where both of these avenues can reside. Activists need to learn about messaging, and audience engagement using skills-based approaches, skills that can still be taught by functionalist professors or those with a more traditional PR background. Just as theory and practical skills are complementary in traditional PR curricula, PIC serves as a complement to this same curricula for students who are more interested in social causes. Hou (2019) notes the importance of “rejecting a ‘false binary of public/private’” remarking that what is in the public interest is complicated and not within the domain of any particular group. The tensions between the “state vs. collective, government vs. corporate, commerce vs. public are considered not as mutually exclusive but interwoven as potentially competing forces to shape the public interest in different directions” (Hou, 2019, p. 159). Although Hou is discussing the role of public interest in China, this same idea can be applied to how professors discuss similar tensions within PR. Corporations can participate in PIC initiatives so long as their actions transcend doing more than merely promoting the bottom line (i.e. DICK’s Sporting Goods and the decision to stop selling guns. See Gaither et al., 2018).

Given that this generation of students is leading the effort to ensure that retail is more sustainable (Petro, 2020), and that companies using pride as a marketing strategy are authentic and not just implementing rainbow-washing approaches (Wolny, 2021), PIC is a valuable area of study that does offer a different approach to traditional CSR approaches

that some of these students may see as inauthentic.

Johnston and Pieczka (2019) view the public interest as the foundation of democratic governance and public policy stating that it should incorporate “political reflection on how the relationship between the individual and the state should be managed” (p. 9). We can see this also being applicable to public relations education in the sense that managing and maintaining relationships between the public and organizations is a central tenet of the field. “Public relations shares a common link with public interest through valorization of publics” (Gaither & Curtin, 2019, p. 124). As areas such as journalism and public relations struggle to reexamine the nature of objectivity and the relevancy of a functionalist approach to pedagogy while these fields are contemplating how to combat misinformation, PIC offers a potential structure to move beyond the confines of “neutrality and impartiality” (Campbell & Marshall, 2002). Given that PIC utilizes science-based strategic communication strategies, PIC instruction teaches students how to define what is considered the public good by using an evidence-backed approach. When faculty use PIC’s body of knowledge to examine and evaluate how social movements have used strategic communication, students interested in activism will better acquire the necessary skills to be successful than if they took traditional public relations courses.

#### *Connections to Critical Pedagogy*

Teaching activism is not a new concept and is most associated with the notion of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy has been a part of curriculum discussions since the 1970s. Freire (1972) first introduced the view that students should have a voice in their own education. This change was proposed as a way to move past the banking model of education where students were expected to passively listen to lectures and recall facts for an exam. Freire noted that this was a form of educational colonialism that silenced diverse voices and experiences in the classroom.

Freire's views on liberating education are applicable to PIC curriculum building in that it helps students understand how to not only express their own views and take ownership of their own educational process, but also amplify the voices of those they serve in the hopes of creating a more just society. The action-reflection framework proposed by Freire teaches students how to incorporate the importance of genuine and effective dialogue where both action and reflection are essential components (Freire, 1972). Giroux (1997) later added to the notion of critical pedagogy stating that it provided a "language of possibility" Today, critical pedagogy is "concerned with the elimination of oppression, the resurgence of hope and possibility--in short, with the making of a better world in which to live. A better world for all" (Shaw as cited in Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2020 p. 26). The perspective of making the world a better place to live directly aligns with many of the same PIC goals.

Traditionally, academia has favored "objective" knowledge; however, this perception is often tied to our notions of objectivity defined by white knowledge construction. Recent events have shed light on the fact that many of our institutional structures, education included, have ignored the voices of marginalized peoples (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2020). As such, there has been an increased push to decolonize syllabi, meaning attempts have been made to bring in more readings from authors from different backgrounds (Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020). In addition to bringing in material sourced from authors of different genders, sexual orientations, races, and ethnicities, critical pedagogy values the first-person accounts of students. "Pedagogy takes into account the critical relationship between the purpose of education, the context of education, the content of what is being taught, and the methods of how it is taught. It also includes who is being taught, who is teaching, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to structure and power" (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2020, p. 22). In the past, education has relied heavily on

the banking model, alienating students from being active participants in their own education. The banking system is a model that at best encourages thinking, but does little to foster engagement. However, critical pedagogy encourages students to not only be active participants in the classroom, but teaches them to be active members within their own communities.

Similar to PIC, critical pedagogy is still an emerging field that is constantly being redefined. For public relations, implementing a critical pedagogical approach would mean moving away from the traditional corporate case studies or campaigns and incorporating more cases that look at how activist groups have utilized similar PR tools in their endeavors. Ciszek and Rodriguez (2020), write about the importance of “decentering whiteness and heteronormativity, and [how] it works to disrupt the problem of homogeneity in public relations research and practice” (p. 537). If the field of public relations wants to move forward in an ethical way, it will become increasingly more important for public relations curriculum to adopt a more critical pedagogical approach in an effort to train students to be more aware of the current social and political space they will enter once they join the workforce; a PIC curriculum provides such a foundation. Fessmann (2017) argued that the social activism of the Millennial generation gave reason for further developing PIC. Downes (2017) suggests that by having an understanding of PIC, college students would not only be able to hear the call to promote social change, but also have the ability to follow through and create social change upon graduation and their subsequent employment. We believe the increase in social activism shown by members of Gen Z demonstrates the need for a PIC curriculum is even greater now. Without such a move, public relations and other communication fields may lose students interested in activism and advocacy to other fields and disciplines.

### **Creating a New Field of Study**

The process of creating a new academic field is no novel task. Academia is generally steeped in tradition and while fields and disciplines may adapt to changing times, the introduction of new disciplines is not common and takes effort from various stakeholders and institutions. Currently, graduate-level PIC programs are offered at the University of Florida, Florida State University, and West Virginia University. Additionally, faculty from other institutions are introducing and have taught PIC as units in other classes, special topic courses, or potential electives. Researchers are also including PIC as part of their program of research as is evident by the growth of the field's flagship journal *The Journal of Public Interest Communications*. However, a formal systematic framework for building this field on a larger scale does not yet exist. Looking at the evolution of Women's Studies in the 1960s and '70s and beyond provides a rough framework as we seek to build PIC as a unique and significant academic discipline.

Ginsberg (2008) wrote that Women's Studies development "mirror[ed] larger changes in both American and academic politics, culture and history" (p. 1). The same can be seen with the development of PIC and the importance of teaching young activists essential skills. While social movements and activism are not new concepts, climate change and racial injustice are no longer issues that interest and impact a select few. The killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor led to massive protests throughout the United States. Young activists such as Greta Thunberg speak out at climate summits attended by world leaders. Students can learn the skills to be architects, doctors, and journalists, but there is currently no field that teaches a unique skill set to our future activists.

The work of curriculum building should employ a diverse perspective in content, thought, and lived experiences (Kvam et al., 2018). In Martin et al.'s (2020) recent study, they found that including topics

surrounding diversity not only helped students expand their viewpoints, but also helped explain key media concepts as well. PIC has the same opportunity to bring concepts such as activism into the public relations classroom, while expanding student viewpoints and also explaining key public relations concepts such as two-way symmetrical communication or the importance of stakeholders.

Like Freire's contributions to critical pedagogy, early Women's Studies scholars and educators "were actively *creating and owning* knowledge based on their own personal and political experiences" (Ginsberg, 2008, p. 10). PIC, like the beginnings of Women's Studies, is in the process of simply being recognized as a legitimate discipline. There are a few spaces where scholars can meet to discuss research at conferences (for example Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), International Communication Association (ICA), and frank gathering), but there has yet to be a designated avenue to share syllabi and pedagogy. Although we do review existing PIC syllabi and programs of study in a subsequent section, we hope that this is the start of a larger movement to discuss more comprehensive goals of systematic PIC education. However, we are still building PIC based on personal experience as we create and own its body of knowledge.

In the 1980s, Women's Studies experienced conservative backlash. Even today, there are critics of gender equality initiatives such as Title IX (Ginsberg, 2008). However, despite this reaction there was an increased effort to focus on efforts to examine the nature of intersectionality in the field. During this time, Women's Studies programs worked on establishing core courses, minors, and even BA programs. These programs had to contend with defining theory and curricula, while defending themselves against internal academic forces and external political forces (Ginsberg, 2008). Given the current political environment, these challenges exist for

the early stages of PIC curriculum development as well.

Much of the academy is siloed based on expertise. Even within communication disciplines you will often see journalism, public relations, advertising, and cultural studies separated into areas or departments. While these areas are unique and important, the communication industry is becoming increasingly hybridized and expects recent graduates to be able to adapt to new positions that often blur the lines among these fields. PIC's interdisciplinary nature gives students an opportunity to explore many of these avenues beyond the typical silos of traditional programs. In the past, public relations students would not always be exposed to critical cultural ideas, which have a strong foundation in promoting more ethical systems. PIC curriculum can bridge the gaps among many of these areas giving students a more robust understanding of communication. Furthermore, theoretical understandings within PR would be enhanced by a more diversified curriculum and PIC would give students within cultural studies, postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, and queer studies the ability to develop a practical and applicable skill set (Ciszek & Rodriguez, 2020).

In addition to providing public relations students with a more critical perspective, PIC provides a space to discuss and push back against the similar backlash experienced by Women's Studies development in the 1980s. PIC's interdisciplinary nature draws on other areas and provides new ways of speaking about race and gender in a critical way that may provide a more secure avenue for teachers to introduce concepts such as diversity and inclusion into the classroom. One activity presented in current PIC classes and trainings is the "back -of- the- envelope guide to communications strategy<sup>1</sup>" Students are asked to think of a social issue and how to create change within that context. They are then asked "who

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1 The back-of-the-envelope guide communications strategy can be found in Christiano & Neimand (2017b)'s Stanford Social Innovation Review.

has to do something they're not doing now (or stop doing something) for you to achieve that goal?" (Christiano & Neimand, 2017b, para 15). Given the number of proposed bills against Critical Race Theory require that educators "who discuss ugly episodes in history, or controversial events [...] explore 'contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective'" (Florido, 2021, para 13), this activity could possibly allow PR educators to look at "contending perspectives" in a way that could teach students to think about changing the minds of those who hold on to problematic beliefs that promote white supremacist mentalities.

Students want to learn more about events such as the Tulsa massacre and Japanese internment camps (Florido, 2021). Events such as the killing of George Floyd have prompted this generation of students to want to learn more about these issues. However, parents, conservative administrators, and politicians present a major barrier to incorporating these topics into the current curriculum. In addition, the traditional silos often present in communication departments and colleges give power to those forces that do not want to consider the importance of change. However, incorporating PIC's interdisciplinary approach to public relations curricula could be a way to incorporate the back-of-the-envelope guide to our own educational system. By examining the process of Women's Studies curriculum development, who also faced a similar challenge with regard to negotiating traditional academic structures (Ginsberg, 2008), in addition to critical pedagogy, PIC can use a similar approach of development, adaptability, and perseverance to create a space where both meaningful dialogue is promoted and practical skills are taught. The evolution of Women's Studies programs over the past 50 years demonstrates how similar fields can be developed in the wake of political tensions in an effort to create change. This context provides some comfort that the same is possible for PIC.



### **Potential PIC Benefits and Curriculum**

While we recognize that PIC is a unique field that can be applicable to a variety of different areas from journalism to health communication, we have chosen to focus specifically on how PIC can be incorporated into public relations programs. We follow the work of Taylor (2001) and Hutchison (2002) who examined ways to incorporate internationalization and ethics respectively into the existing public relations curriculum. They did so by making suggestions for how to bring these concepts into the existing coursework established by the The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) as well as sharing ideas for standalone courses focused on these topics.

Members of the CPRE are mindful that public relations curricula should be flexible and adapt to societal and professional changes while also allowing students to take courses or even pursue minors in other areas of interest to better prepare them for the workplace (Duhe et al., 2018). While the CPRE suggests some content areas that might enhance a student's learning experience include social media, business literacy, analytics, and digital technology (Duhe et al., 2018) and Krishna, et al. (2020) add listening, digital storytelling, and leadership to this list, the authors of this manuscript believe educators could add to interdisciplinarity within public relations curricula by adding coursework related to PIC as electives for PR majors. Further, they believe a PIC-focused curriculum could be built by following the guidelines of the CPRE and making adjustments to them much as Taylor (2001) and Hutchinson (2002) did in their work. The following sections look at PIC curriculum building from a micro to macro perspective starting with an examination of current syllabi followed by an exploration of current programs of study and our suggestions for a potential curriculum based on CPRE guidelines.

#### **A Review of existing PIC Syllabi and Programs of Study**

Similar to the early introduction of Women's Studies programs

in the 1970s, PIC classes appear to be offered at only a few institutions<sup>2</sup>. This review is by no means exhaustive, but does attempt to cover key learning objectives, major assignments, and required readings. Five PIC class syllabi were examined; four focused within PR/PIC and one focusing on journalism and PIC. One of the major similarities across all the syllabi examined was the emphasis on discussion. This discussion-based emphasis appears to align with Freire's (1972) pedagogical principle of giving students and future activists ownership of their own education and compliments the nature of the course content, which predominantly emphasizes relevant and timely case studies focusing on social justice campaigns. In addition to implementing discussion, there are a number of skills building activities and learning goals including campaign analyses and overviews for developing strategic plans. For example, one activity that gets students to learn the complexities of trying to build activist movements within the policy sector breaks the class into different interest groups. Student groups are given different organizations and have to come up with a strategic plan to persuade one group of students, who are assigned to be government officials up for re-election, to develop a policy that will align with their interests. For the duration of class, students meet with other groups with a similar interest to form coalitions. The instructor also serves as the scheduling assistant for the elected official student group and can halt or grant access to these policy makers in a way that reflects the power the various interest groups may hold within our political system (i.e., a group representing a powerful lobby would get more access

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<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to know the full scope of PIC's current reach because there are likely professors and instructors working in this area who are not aware of the growing PIC academic and practitioner community. However, we received syllabi from five universities, including those from the authors, and spoke to PIC educators currently working on developing curricula standards for the field. Both authors are part of a group of educators currently working to establish a more standard PIC curricula.

than the group of concerned parents). At the end of the activity, students have the opportunity to discuss what they learned with regard to policy, activism, persuasion, and coalition building. Students who took part in the activity said it helped them learn how to compromise with various stakeholders in order to create meaningful change that would benefit the most people.

The Intro to PIC syllabi for the University of Florida Master's program, as well as a forthcoming undergraduate PIC class taught at Auburn University, require *New Power* by Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms as required reading. This book is not a traditional textbook potentially highlighting how PIC does attempt to bridge scholarship and practice. Other required readings include texts and articles related to relevant movements such as March for our Lives. *Glimmer of Hope* by the March for our Lives founders was also a commonly utilized text. Although there were a number of similar readings, there were also a number of readings that focused on specific social movements like Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement and Black Lives Matter. Professors also brought in readings to emphasize important activist skill sets like community organizing, the importance of storytelling and using metaphors, and audience engagement. The University of Washington's journalism/PIC course assigned *Community-Centered Journalism and Reporting Inequality* along with the Associated Press Stylebook. These texts again highlight the importance of combining skill building (AP Stylebook) with theory. The two other texts, while more focused on social justice issues pertaining to journalism and not PR, also demonstrate the importance of community building and understanding your publics in a more comprehensive and just manner.

Another way professors can bring activism into the PR classroom through PIC is to utilize guest speakers. At the University of Florida, guest speakers from Participant Media, Burness, and other PIC-

related organizations have come to classes to give students networking opportunities and first-hand knowledge with regard to working in the PIC field beyond the classroom. Professors doing PIC related research can also provide useful insights for students. Providing a mix of practitioner and research focused guest speakers helps to promote the idea of using scientifically grounded strategies to promote social change. Guest speakers and partnerships with local non-profits and activist groups would also provide students with relevant hands-on experience.

West Virginia University is also in the process of developing an Advocacy and PIC class with the intent of also creating a stand-alone MA program. While WVU is currently in the process of creating PIC classes and programs, they do promote the Public Interest Communication Research Lab which “work[s] to train leading undergraduate and graduate students to continue the legacy of pursuing social science for social change” (West Virginia University Media Innovation Center, 2021, para 2). These research-based institutions help students learn and apply various skills they can utilize in future careers as advocates and activists much as our proposed PIC curriculum would.

### **Suggested Program Curriculum**

Following Taylor’s (2001) and Hutchison’s (2002) examples, we offer suggestions for how educators could incorporate PIC into existing public relations programs. From a larger program view, the ideal PIC curriculum would include 45 hours comprised of PIC, PR, journalism, mass communication, and/or communication courses and would be filled out with electives from other disciplines beyond those found in communication schools and departments. Any programs accredited by ACEJMC would also need to be certain any program course hours do not exceed the limits imposed by the accrediting body. By allowing such flexibility, the addition of a PIC curriculum or track would be fairly easy and also cost efficient as few new courses would be needed. In addition,

the curriculum would allow students to build a major to fit their unique interests as they pertain to the public interest such as interests in social justice, racial equity, sustainability, gender studies, social movements, peace and hunger studies, health, science, ecology, etc.

The PIC curriculum would need to have a theoretical basis that might include coursework in public relations, mass communication, communication, and/or rhetoric. The PIC curriculum might be set-up with choices from which students could select the course or courses of most interest to them or it could be set-up to match the strengths and abilities of the current faculty. Similarly, a PIC curriculum should include a research course. Again, PIC students could pick from courses such as survey research methods, qualitative research, quantitative research, critical perspectives, and/or rhetorical methods based on their interests and/or the offerings of their respective departments. A writing course would also be necessary for the PIC curriculum. This course could also come from a program's existing coursework as a public relations writing or a news writing course would suffice.

This suggested PIC curriculum should also include PIC-specific content. In place of the introductory public relations or similar course, a new course that introduces students to PIC, advocacy, activism, and cause communication could be added. If the addition of a new course is not feasible, the addition of a PIC, advocacy, activism, and cause communication unit to an existing introduction to public relations course could be implemented until the new PIC-focused course could be created. While it would be ideal if a PIC case studies course built on content related to PIC could be offered, infusing PIC-related cases into an existing case studies course would be acceptable until an independent PIC case studies course could be developed. Similarly, the PIC curriculum would be best suited with a PIC campaigns course that allowed students to work with community partners who worked and advocated for the public

interest. Such a course could also tie-in well with any civic engagement work the department, school, college and/or university was actively supporting and could build better relationships with entities across campus. Again, if a separate PIC campaigns course could not be offered, faculty could include a PIC-related community partner as one whom students could work with for their semester project.

Another required course in a PIC curriculum would be an ethics class. Again, if there is an existing public relations ethics class, PIC-specific content could be added to it if resources did not allow for a stand-alone PIC-specific ethics course. However, either course should include the ethics of care perspective because such a worldview to ethics would be most appropriate for budding PIC professionals. Much of PR's ethical perspective, especially in times of crisis, is influenced by an ethics of justice perspective where legal obligations and an effort to maintain or rebuild reputation are emphasized (Tao & Kim, 2017). In contrast, an ethics-of-care perspective would bring a more humanistic approach to ethics. Ethics of care derives from the work of Gilligan (1982) and shifts the focus of ethical responses to accountability to those people affected by the situation from a focus on legal rights (Bauman, 2011; Simola, 2003). Such a shift in ethical perspective puts the public interest in the center of any communication efforts (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018). As Madden and Alt (2021) simply state, "care should come before image" (p. 38). By adding ethics of care to coursework, academics would be fostering Gen Z students' orientation of being we-centric.

The PIC curriculum should also include an internship experience for students so that they could apply their knowledge and skills in a professional setting. This step might require a conversation between PIC faculty and internship directors to be sure the experience would allow students to work within PIC, advocacy, activism and/or cause communication and to help internship directors to better recognize what

would constitute PIC-related internships.

Finally, students should have the ability to pick from a range of courses for electives. PIC faculty might have to work with faculty in other departments to make agreements for PIC students to take courses in these other areas to ensure there are enough seats in these outside courses. Some areas in which students might take electives include sociology, sustainability, science communication, health communication, ecology, gender studies, climate, sociology, social movements, diversity, political science, nonprofit management, civic engagement, social media, digital storytelling, leadership, organizational communication, rhetoric, business, marketing, management, crisis communication, foreign languages, and corporate social responsibility. Courses outside of communication divisions such as ecology, sociology, health, science, climate, social movements, diversity, civic engagement, foreign languages, peace and conflict studies, hunger studies, and political science would help students to build the interdisciplinarity of their knowledge and allow them to pursue their interests as they relate to the public interest. Similarly, courses in areas such as nonprofit management, leadership, organizational communication, crisis communication, corporate social responsibility, management and business would help students to understand how to manage and maintain organizations devoted to PIC and advocacy. Further courses in social media, digital storytelling, rhetoric, foreign languages, and marketing would help students to build persuasive promotional materials and develop better programs for PIC organizations.

### **Innovative Solutions for Student Engagement: Suggestions for Instructors interested in PIC**

In addition to utilizing resources that incorporate interdisciplinary learning, PIC gives students the opportunity to pursue civic engagement in the classroom. In 2006, The Carnegie classification system for higher education included a “Community Engagement Classification.” This

**Table 1***Suggested Curriculum Based on CPRE Standards*

Intro	Theory	Research	Writing	Ethics/Law	Campaigns/Case Studies	Electives
PR Principles	PR Theory	Survey/ Quantitative	Newswriting	Intro to PIC	Case Studies	Social Move- ments/Social Justice
Mass Comm	Mass Comm	Qualitative	PR Writing	Comm Law	PIC Campaigns	Social Media/ Digital Media Sto- rytelling
Interpersonal Comm	Interpersonal Comm	Critical		Ethics of Care	Campaigns	Health Comm
Rhetorical Studies	Rhetorical Studies	Rhetorical		Comm Eth- ics		Ecology/Environ- mental Comm/ Sustainability
						Organizational Comm
						Business/Market- ing
						Leadership

**Note.** *The internship/hands-on experience CPRE standard was omitted from this chart due to the already flexible nature of most university internship programs*

classification was meant to incorporate service-learning “to the primary systems and structures of higher education” (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011, p. 3). Civic engagement is closely tied to the goals of higher education and PIC and is meant to encourage students to become democratic citizens (Saltmarsh, 2011). Civic engagement incorporates



service-learning initiatives which move us beyond the banking model of education (Freire, 1972) and teaches students to be advocates and active members of the community.

When thinking of the sustainability of a movement, a central PIC tenet, recent Gen Z-led movements offer ample opportunity for student engagement in the classroom as well as throughout the university and local community. For example, the Sunrise Movement allows participants to join hubs, which offer new opportunities to collaborate with local communities. Similarly, March for Our Lives has various local and university chapters. The localized focus of these movements not only helps to sustain the movements encouraging long-term action and change, but also gives students an opportunity to become involved at a reasonable entry point.

Students can feel overwhelmed by massive social issues such as racial injustice, gun control, and climate change. Larger movements might also present a barrier to entry for those who do not live in urban areas. Brewer and Roccas (2001) suggest that individuals need to feel connected to a movement, while also feeling as if they are contributing in a unique way. The simple act of discussing activism and advocacy in the context of something such as the Sunshine Movement, when talking about climate change, or March for Our Lives, if discussing public relations and policy, can spark student interests enough for them to consider becoming involved in local chapters beyond the classroom. The initial act of joining a local chapter might even prompt students to become involved in national chapters once they graduate. Heimens and Timms (2018) refer to this phenomenon as moving up the participation ladder, which increases participation in social causes. Additionally, such involvement allows students to realize the political and social engagement that members of Gen Z equate with being good citizens (Irregular Labs, 2019). The participation ladder also provides a low-stakes entry for professors who

might feel more comfortable casually discussing social causes, but might be less inclined to directly bring in activist community partners and projects.

### **Conclusion**

While PIC is still an emerging field, some scholars (Christiano, 2017) believe that it has the potential to make inroads in curtailing inequities and addressing social justice issues. While PIC is grounded in the public relations discipline and its scholarship, PIC courses and curricula differ in both content and in the students that they attract – those students “who are interested in social activism but who are not comfortable with the corporate focus of PR (Fessmann, 2017, p. 27). This proposed PIC curriculum would allow Gen Z students, those who will be the generation of traditional college-aged students for the next decade and a half (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019), to pursue their passions and interests in ending inequities and social injustices. It allows for interdisciplinarity and flexibility to best suit student, faculty, and program needs and resources. PIC-centric courses could easily support students who wish to apply their learning to societal issues.

In sum, the PIC curriculum could be one through which members of Gen Z learn how to use their energy, passions, and knowledge of social media to do more and be more engaged with social justice, politics, and other causes so that they are no longer accused of being slacktivists. “Thus, PIC ultimately hopes to train and empower a new generation of communication-savvy social change activists” (Fessmann, 2017, p. 27). During the 1970s, the original pioneers of Women’s Studies found the interdisciplinary nature of this new discipline difficult based on their more traditional trainings. However, with the introduction of graduate programs, the field’s unique nature became normalized and Ph.D. programs in the area trained a new generation of scholars interested in changing views of gender and societal power (Ginsberg, 2008). PIC development is in

a similar stage, and we hope this first step is just the start of growing a rigorous and distinct field of study that has the opportunity to teach future activists. As Downes (2017) states, PIC curricula should “empower others who can rally around causes leading toward the good” (p. 39). When educators introduce PIC to students, they ultimately introduce PIC to organizations as students educated in PIC will soon move up into management roles and will have the opportunity to work for the public good directly.

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