

## **Creativity is the key: Incorporating creative activism to public relations classrooms through using creative pedagogy (Special CFP: Teaching activism in the public relations classroom)**

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to remedy a drawback that widely exists in current activist public relations education: the lack of creativity in both content building and delivery. The traditional teaching of activist public relations has focused on confrontational or radical activism that manifests itself in political campaigns, street protests, civil disobedience, or riots, by invoking social movement theories and case studies that may cause despondency. Little educational effort has captured or incorporated the nonthreatening, subtle activism aimed at incremental social changes to public relations curricula. To invigorate the activist public relations classroom, we argue for essential dual creativity: (1) by incorporating creative activism as a content framework (i.e., building content around creative activism and selecting inspirational case studies); and (2) by applying creative pedagogy for activist public relations (i.e., delivering content through participatory play, immersive storytelling, and field studies; and diversifying assessments such as creating case-study portfolios and creative project-making in team). Overall, our research contributes to activist public relations education through offering both theoretically informed and practical insight to developing creativity as a key to student engagement.

*Keywords:* public relations, activism, creativity, creative activism, creative pedagogy, student engagement

***Introduction: From a historical tension to theoretical conflation***

Scholars (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996) have long criticised a historical tension or division between public relations and activism, with public relations mainly being a corporate function, or an instrument of commerce, to manage activists and pressure groups in favour of organisational interests. Traditionally, activists refer to those who have high levels of conviction and emotional engagement with a single issue and thus challenge the status quo and push for an uncompromised vision (Chua, 2018; Swann, 2014). Derville (2005) exemplifies this activist approach with Greenpeace's refusal to mediate with DuPont (a chemical company). Public relations practitioners need to handle the activist stakeholder who can impede organisational goals either directly through protest, boycott, or indirectly through government regulation (Karlberg, 1996). Accordingly, activism is excluded from mainstream public relations or portrayed as antagonist to public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Likewise, while activism has historically involved public relations-like activities and strategies (e.g., publicity, media influence), it tends to differentiate itself from public relations by claiming activism creates social changes while public relations maintains hegemony and domination (Choudry, 2015; Holtzhausen, 2012).

To relieve this historical tension, a growing number of theorists have called for an activist turn to public relations (Moloney & McKie, 2015), or theoretical conflation of public relations and activism (e.g., Mules, 2021; Weaver, 2018), mainly inspired by the postmodern thinking (Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto 2002; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). In contrast to modern Western discourses that are infused with *language games* prescribing rational-critical debate and consensus-seeking (Lyotard, 1984), *postmodernism* prioritises dissensus and plurality of meaning-making arising from activism and resistant social movements (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). For example, *differential consciousness*

typifies postmodern resistance by describing activists working with or within dominant ideologies to challenge them and promote diversity (Sandoval, 2000). To this end, activists have increasingly used public relations interventions or hired public relations veterans to promote social causes (Mules, 2019). In this sense, activism can be seen as “public relations in social movements” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 348), or “the postmodern agency of public relations” (Holtzhausen, 2012, p. 211).

It is in such an activism context that scholars reposition public relations as making changes both within organisations and in society. For example, Holtzhausen (2012) and Pompper (2018; 2021) describe public relations’ potential as an insider-activist change agent and ethics guardian to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within organisations and fight for those less powerful. Pompper (2015) articulates public relations’ stewardship role in navigating organisations toward greater corporate social responsibility/sustainability (CSR/S). On a societal level, Karlberg (1996) endorses the social value of public relations in community relations. Inspired by this advocacy, Dozier and Lauzen (2000) recommend expanding public relations from being a professional activity that serves organisations or employers to an intellectual domain that includes alternative perspectives from activism. Additionally, empirical studies have found that activists gradually see powerful organisations more as enablers or support mechanisms than barriers to social causes and thus practice a type of activism called prosocial public relations (Brooks et al., 2018).

While activism is increasingly conflated theoretically with public relations, also known as activist public relations, it is insufficiently involved in public relations education. Activists’ voices, practices, and lived experience are under-represented in public relations to the extent of being glaringly omitted or downplayed from U.S. public relations education (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Similarly, activism is

globally either excluded from public relations curricula or taught from a managerial perspective (Fitch & L'Etang, 2020; Mules, 2019; 2021). Nor do professional bodies acknowledge the significance of activist public relations education. For example, the *Capabilities Framework*<sup>1</sup> established by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management in 2018 did not recommend any curriculum development or professional training to realise public relations' social value through developing activism that challenges power inequities and the status quo (Mules, 2021).

Nevertheless, multiple benefits apply to teaching activism in public relations education. Focusing on public relations' social value and legitimising activists, especially subaltern and marginalised groups as a driving force, educators can re-imagine public relations as a progressive field of knowledge and practice (Vardeman et al., 2019). Students can develop a richer understanding of public relations and how activists have contributed to the field. Educators will be able to carve out new curricular territory (i.e., activist public relations) to allay their professional tension: On the one hand, they are obligated to teach students managerial-functional public relations (i.e., instrumental knowledge) governed by an economic value to maintain vested interests (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996); but on the other hand, educators aspire to teach public relations as an ethical and social conscience occupation to promote social justice, economic equality, political freedom, environment sustainability, human rights, or simply a better world for people (Pompper, 2015; 2018;

1 The Global Capabilities Framework for Public Relations and Communication Management underlies how public relations and communication management professionals, educators and employers should perform at their best and reach full potential. It encourages educators to use this framework to base curriculum for educating the future generations of the profession (Institute for Public Relations, 2018).

Sison & Panol; 2019).

Despite both the necessity and benefit of teaching activist public relations, it is unknown how relevant curricula and pedagogical practices have developed across universities. It is also unclear whether existing course offerings and teaching approaches are creative enough to engage students in learning activism within the public relations classroom and beyond. Against this backdrop, this pedagogical article aims to address inadequate or outdated teaching practices in this important area. The remainder of this article thus overviews extant approaches to teaching activism within public relations and identifies a common shortcoming: the lack of creativity in both learning content design and delivery. We then elaborate on the essential *dual creativity* (i.e., using creative activism as a content framework and creative pedagogy as a teaching philosophy or theoretical framework) approach to reinvigorate the traditional public relations classroom, followed by inviting educators to new encounters to make learning happen. Lastly, we conclude that creativity of learning content design and delivery is the key to enriching and revitalising activist public relations education.

### **Reflecting the approaches to teaching activism in public relations curricula**

Based on reviewing the literature we notice that the approaches to teaching activism in public relations curricula follow three stages: (1) Lacking or insignificantly including activism in public relations curricula; (2) Focusing on confrontational or radical activism that involves communicating provocatively to demand more ground than the target organisations are willing to give (Derville, 2005); and (3) Starting to embrace activism in subtle and creative forms.

#### ***Lacking or insignificantly including activism in public relations curricula***

While critical scholars (e.g., Demetrious, 2016; L'Etang & Pieczka,

2006) propose that public relations curricula be radicalised through including activism, mainstream public relations education continues to focus on corporate and institutional contexts and ignore (possibly less glamorous) activism that challenges societal structure and promotes social justice (Fitch & L'Etang, 2020; Mules, 2019; 2021). Not only do faculties struggle to integrate activism in practical public relations courses, but also few textbooks are available for teaching it (Pascual-Ferrá, 2019). The main reason for this absence is that universities consistently seek to link public relations to employability and equip students with professional skills through work integrated learning (e.g., internship) or hiring industry mentors as adjuncts (Macnamara et al., 2018; Mules, 2021). Consequently, adjuncts rarely seek to innovate curriculum because they are accustomed to teaching vocationally orientated programs to gain positive student feedback that advances their own careers (Pompper, 2011).

Because (as discussed earlier) public relations has been theoretically conflated with activism, there have emerged ongoing efforts to incorporate activism in public relations education. For example, The Museum of Public Relations, a non-profit, educational institution, offers free lectures, documents, books, and artifacts from its digital archives to inform the public of how public relations and its social application have evolved (Bivins, 2015). Especially the Museum's three annual events, Black PR History, Latino PR History, and PR Women Who Changed History demonstrate the power of public relations in inspiring activism and social movements. However, such efforts to integrate activism in public relations curricula in universities globally have not yet reached a critical mass (Fitch & L'Etang, 2020; Mules, 2021).

### ***Focusing on confrontational or radical activism***

Notably, public relations history education seems to focus on the confrontational, radical, or sometimes deemed subversive activism for a revolutionary purpose (Derville, 2005). As Wakefield et al. (2011) point

out, *confrontational activism* featuring hostility or complex conflicts to gain power and legitimacy over dominant institutions, is emphasised in public relations in general and social movements particularly. As such, traditional teaching of activist public relations tends to draw on radical activists' militant tactics such as protests, sit-ins, boycotts, sabotage, public shaming, and creating direct pressure without tolerance of compromise (Derville, 2005; Swann, 2014).

Moreover, traditional teaching of activist public relations has relied on orthodox theories such as social movement studies, critical theories of power, hegemony and resistance, and the ethics literature for professional practice (Adi, 2018). Taylor and Das (2010) especially link activist public relations with social movement: "Social movements begin with a group of committed individuals and in order for them to get their definition of the issue and the resolution of the issue onto the public agenda, they need to communicate their issues to broader publics" (p. 14). In other words, activists need to apply public relations to movement building. Parallel to this theoretical orientation is the widely used case study approach to those serious and often heavy-hearted examples, ranging from the London riots of 2011 (Capozzi & Spector, 2016), the public relations battle between Colorado GASP and Philip Morris (Stokes & Rubin, 2010), the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) campaign on curtailing venereal disease rates (Anderson, 2017), and the ongoing Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements on social media (Vardeman et al., 2019).

Regardless of what theories and examples are taught in activist public relations courses, the primary delivery method seems to follow a "banking model," preferably to deposit information into students and view them as receiving it unchallenged (Batac, 2017, p. 140). There is lack of pedagogical discussion on activist public relations to prioritise critical and creative inquiries that are both prerequisites of social and political action. As a result, students may feel disengaged in the traditional activist public

relations classroom as they think learning such content is irrelevant unless they choose to become an activist in future (Eschle & Maignashca, 2006). Doyle (2020) also cautioned that long-term exposure to heavy-hearted case studies might generate a negative impact on student perception of efficacy—whether they believe activism will (positively) change the world or not—thus discouraging their civic participation. In turn, such pessimism may reinforce student desire to acquire only in-demand public relations skills, such as publicity, media relations, and marketing promotion to meet professional requirements (Batac, 2017).

### ***Starting to embrace activism in subtle and creative forms***

Compared to the dominant focus on confrontational or radical activism, Mules' (2019) recent analysis of public relations textbooks has captured an emerging trend to embrace the public relations activism that exemplifies how creative communication successfully facilitate positive social change through, for example, the performing arts, visual communication, and documentaries. However, Mules did not further explore how the inherent and much-needed creativity in activism should be articulated and emphasised to students so that they can develop fuller and more nuanced understandings of public relations as meaningful, imaginative, and impactful activism. Indeed, the preceding review of traditional teaching of activist public relations has revealed such a shortcoming: the lack of creativity in both learning content design (what types of activism would appeal to students) and delivery (how to motivate students to become active learners). Such creativity within activist public relations education is what our article addresses.

### **Bringing the essential dual creativity to activist public relations education**

Public relations educators need to rethink how they transform the teaching of activist public relations, perhaps by advancing it from including activism within mainstream public relations education (Mules,



2021), to bringing creativity to activist public relations education. After all, it is an easy option to fill the gap by uncritically including activism in public relations curricula where some activist tactics, such as cultism, violent resistance, and civil disobedience unsuitably lack integrity and ethics that must be emphasised in public relations education (L'Etang, 2016). We add that, along with critical inquiry, creative thinking is essential to revitalise traditional teaching of activist public relations, and this is not an easy fix.

***The essential “dual creativity”***

Specifically, we propose to achieve this *dual creativity* by using creative activism as a framework to build content for activist public relations courses that are, fittingly, taught following creative pedagogy. Creative activism and creative pedagogy are two related but different terms. *Creative activism* can be understood as “a kind of meta-activism that facilitates the engagement of active citizens in temporary, strategically manufactured, transformative interventions in order to change society for the better” through creative communication such as performing arts, forum theatre, urban guerrilla gardening, and spatial design (Harrebye, 2016, p. 25). In this article, we recommend building the teaching blocks around creative activism (as elaborated later), a body of scholarship that recognises the subtle, imaginative, but equally effective activism practice.

*Creative pedagogy*, also known as creative teaching methodology or philosophy, emphasises developing student creativity through three interdependent elements: (1) creative teaching—using innovative and participatory approaches; (2) teaching for creativity—identifying opportunities for student creativity development; and (3) creative learning—motivating students to learn actively through playfulness, collaboration, possibility thinking, and supportive or resourceful contexts (Aleinikov; 2013; Lin, 2011; Oral, 2008). As a theoretical framework, creative pedagogy can be applied to teaching practices in any discipline

ranging from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) to arts, humanities, and social sciences, including creative activism. This theoretical framework is of great value to expand the horizon of activist public relations education and make the teaching practice more dynamic and appealing to students.

***Integrating creative activism into public relations***

To develop creative learning content, public relations educators should learn from both past and contemporary activism practices. For example, in the pre-social media era, activists creatively used different genres of literature (e.g., tales, poetry), the fine and performing arts, happenings, wall doodling, and temporary spatial interventions to convey political messages and pursue social change. The advent of new and social media makes creative activism even easier to raise public awareness, provoke debate, and inspire action, as exemplified by the various virtual museums, digital galleries, hashtag campaigns, and online petitions around the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since contemporary creative activism becomes a category of new media communication, activist public relations courses should be: (1) underpinned by a triad of creative activism, new/social media, and public relations; (2) more process- than result-oriented to enable students to imagine and debate rather than solving problems; and (3) project-based to maximise teamwork and collective action. While promoting creativity, it is not meant to turn a public relations class to an artistic one, nor to prevent students from acquiring public relations knowledge or developing professional skills. Rather, universities and/or educators may consider offering the study of creative activism within an established public relations degree, or a program that is part of a nonprofit or social transformation certificate.

Integrating creative activism in the art (not just management science) of public relations offers a new alternative to ignite student

interest, curiosity, and enthusiasm about learning public relations for social change. Through showcasing creative examples in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere while maintaining academic rigour, educators can ease students in learning and inspire them to envisage other ways of living and being that are not constrained by the dominant power. Through exposing students to a “longer lens” (L’Etang, 2015, p. 31) of creative activism, we facilitate their multi-dimensional thinking of social justice issues so they appreciate the collaborative effect of creative expressions and public relations. More importantly, we can transform the public relations classroom from a safe space characterised by normative theories and instrumental rationality to advance organisational interests, to a fun and challenging environment where students are guided to reflect on everyday activism critically and creatively.

***Applying creative pedagogy to teach creative activism***

To teach creative activism effectively, it is necessary to adopt creative pedagogy as a guiding framework that focuses on cultivating students’ awareness of current events; encouraging them to be life-long creative, to value individual interest and agency, and to actively develop ideas into action (Hay et al., 2020). Taking such a focus, public relations educators should see students as both co-creators of learning and active citizens, with their ideas welcomed, their concerns about issues acknowledged, and the creativity behind problem-solving appreciated. Students in the activist public relations classroom are no longer deemed to be silent observers of teaching like spectators in a grand theatre. They are motivated to interrogate the public relations strategies of creative activism, analyse the creativity of activist public relations in their own language, and imagine alternatives to how things can be done to be otherwise (Desai, 2017). Public relations educators who are interested in what is possible for creative activism to counter hegemony should particularly strive for student-centred, eye-opening, minds-on and hands-on learning, and active

participation. One way to achieve this is not to impose predetermined moral positions but, in Ellsworth's (2005) words, to use "a pedagogy of the unknowable"—encouraging exploration but not dictating "the final correct answer" (p. 76).

Among the many forms of creative pedagogy, we highlight two that are suitable to public relations education. One is the *pedagogy of playfulness* that fosters participation, enjoyment, and deep learning through affective practice (Facer, 2019; Hay et al., 2020), such as games, role-plays, and mini-theatre performance. Through playful and affective practice students may see activism as less daunting and distant from their everyday lives and thus be willing to learn more about it, take risks, explore new ideas, or even direct themselves to learn. Creative pedagogy is crucial to relieve students from feeling overwhelmed or apolitical when activist public relations is taught in a theory-heavy and meantime heavy-hearted manner. The pedagogy of playfulness also corresponds to Duncombe's (2016) using affect to create effect within education. Three principles apply to designing enjoyable learning activities (Kolb & Kolb, 2010): (1) balancing between "playful and serious, imaginary and real, and arbitrary and rule bound" (p.28); (2) emphasising play as a learning process that "facilitates the expression of positive and negative emotions through engagement in fantasy and play" (p. 29); and (3) making a specific time and space for the play to help the behaviours associated with it thrive.

Another useful form of creative pedagogy is Freire's (2004) *pedagogy of hope*, or what Simon (1992) calls, a *pedagogy of possibility*. In a public relations context, a *pedagogy of hope* means educators "unveil opportunities (possibilities) for hope, regardless of the obstacles" to social changes (Freire, 2004, p. 9). Its purpose is to empower students to develop the sense that they can make a difference in helping resolve social justice issues in either big or small, incremental or revolutionary ways. The pedagogy of hope also reflects the mentality of creative activists who

create arts and communication not hoping to eradicate racism, sexism, and homophobia directly. Rather, they tend to relentlessly struggle to fight all forms of inequalities in society, while “keeping their unwavering hope and desire to dream of a more equitable and just future” (Desai, 2017, p. 143). The pedagogy of hope or possibility entails three practices: (1) listening to students as co-creators of learning; (2) unknowing—no wrong answers—as central to teaching; and (3) fostering dreaming as part of student imagination of hopeful images—“images of that which is not yet” (Simon, 1992, p. 9).

**Invitation to a few encounters: *Making learning happen***

Considering the preceding theoretical review and creative pedagogical framework, we propose some specific dimensions on how to apply the dual creativity approach mentioned earlier to the teaching of activist public relations. In this section, we invite public relations educators to consider a few ideas that may help them improve the appeal of an activism course to students and motivate them to learn activist public relations in the classroom and beyond. We have also built and reflected on our own experience of teaching relevant activism courses (e.g., Creative Citizenship, Political Advocacy) to make the following recommendations.

***Learning content design***

Content building for a creative activist public relations course can be challenging firstly because it involves cross-disciplinary knowledge, but also because integrating different elements requires thoughtful planning. Depending on the varying expectations and needs of educators, students and institutions, the *broad learning objectives* can be set from three aspects: (1) conceptual understanding, whereby students learn about what is involved in activist public relations and creative approaches to it, and how to be digitally literate on new media; (2) capacity building, so students acquire strategic public relations skills for activism and expertise in identifying and appreciating the creative forms, styles, and expressions

involved in activist public relations; and (3) critical and creative evaluation, to enable students to think critically and creatively so they might evaluate global activism practices or initiatives.

Following Duncombe's (2002) four analytical dimensions of activism, we suggest four building blocks or learning rubrics, to develop and frame the learning content:

(A) The *topics or issues* of creative activism. Educators can choose a wide array of eco-political, socio-cultural, and environmental issues targeted by activism, ranging from poverty, speech freedom, gender equity, indigenous culture, climate change, and eco-fashion, to attract and resonate with students from diverse backgrounds.

(B) The creative *forms* activism takes. This responds to Morrow's (2007) call for a shift from activism as protestation and confrontation toward activism as redefining issues creatively. Students will benefit from such a wider angle of creative activism as meta-activism in discursive, subtle, and artistic forms in everyday encounters. This notional shift offers opportunities to immerse students in an unexpected world of activism filled with delights and inspiration from creative arts and communication, such as poetry, music, painting, drama, dance, documentary, TV/film, theatre performance, and social media memes. This is where interdisciplinary resources and inputs are needed. One possible way to build such a "creative wonderland" is to collaborate with colleagues from other schools or faculties with institutional support. For example, we used teaching resources from our Faculty of Creative industries, Education, and Social Justice for course design and delivery.

(C) The *ways* creative activism is received or interpreted. This points educators to theories of audience segmentation, agency, reception, and participation especially in social media that offer new conditions for developing creative activism (Harrebye, 2015). Most contemporary

activism is not built around a stable political organisation, with reference to party membership or a well-defined repertoire of protests (Harrebye, 2016). Instead, many who participate in activism often gather in creative events or even Facebook group pages. Students need to understand that creative activism is temporal and flexible, in contrast to the stability and stubbornness required in mass social movement.

(D) The *process* and *strategies* of creative activism communication. This is where core public relations theories and principles help students understand why activism and public relations are conflated, and how public relations strategies, tools, and interventions are useful for creative activism to boost impact, engagement, and empowerment, all essential to mobilising social action. The relevant public relations theories can be chosen from persuasion, influence, advocacy, campaigns, ethics, narrative building, media relations, relationship management, community engagement, transmedia storytelling, and social media communication. Students need to develop confidence and pride that when strategic planning and communicating activism is infused with creativity and art, and facilitated by wide-ranging traditional and new media, the social impact and contribution of public relations will reach a new height.

#### ***Activism theories for consideration***

Regarding activism-related theories, we recommend that classical theories of political act, citizenship, and social movement, such as collective behaviour theory (e.g., Lofland, 1985; Melucci, 1996), rational choice theory (e.g., Herrnstein, 1990; Scott, 2000), resource mobilisation theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1987), and political opportunity theory (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004) remain useful for building a fundamental understanding of what activism is and how it works. However, they are insufficient to explain creative activism that operates in non-traditional forms,

and which often lacks basic components of social movement, namely, collective challenge, a common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction (Harrebye, 2015). Therefore, we recommend that public relations educators draw on everyday creative activism such as irony or parody (i.e., to laugh at power and imagine alternatives), utopianism (i.e., an ideological critique of dominant systems), and culture jamming (i.e., resisting and re-creating commercial culture) (see James C. Scott's, 1990, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*). Non-traditional ways of civic participation online (e.g., using irony, parody, or satire) have unfolded a "postmodern-social-media-world" that departs from rational-critical discourses but appeals to participants' and audiences' emotions even on non-public matters (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015, p. 39).

Given the wide spectrum of creative activism, it is hard to develop a coherent theoretical framework to cover the variety of practices. However, remember that the central goal of adding creativity to activist public relations curricula is to create an eye-opening, minds-on, experiential, joyful, lively, and relevant learning experience for students, and help them to become resilient, entrepreneurial, and innovative changemakers in society. Creative courses like this serve to guide students into a new territory. At the end of this article, we append a list of diverse teaching resources, including textbooks, The Conversation essays, TED talks, and YouTube links for educators seeking to integrate creative activism in public relations classes (see Appendix 1).

### ***Case studies***

To mitigate the potential negative impact of heavy-hearted case studies on students' perceived efficacy of activism, that is, whether they believe activism makes a difference (Doyle, 2020), we suggest public relations educators incorporate cheerful examples of creative activism. This is to enact the pedagogy of hope (Freire, 2004), to facilitate students' positive thinking, imagination of alternatives, and creative



problem-solving. As the previous U.S. President, Barack Obama (2011), commented on the booming youth creative activism after the Arab Spring: “Above all, we saw a new generation emerge—a generation that uses their own creativity, talent, and technology to call for a government that represented their hopes and not their fears” [emphasis later added]. What follows are some case studies of creative activism around the world:

- **Australian** youth activists initiated a [#ClimateStrikeOnline](#) campaign, by creating music in their own YouTube channels, sharing artistic posters on Twitter, and creating choreography on TikTok, to increase the appeal of climate change messaging among young people around the world and sustain the movement in a light-hearted way. This case study is likely to resonate with many student audiences.
- The **American** iconic poster of the “[Ballerina and the bull](#)” is another example of creative activism. The thought-provoking artwork created by Micah White through his anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* played a significant role in leading the Occupy Wall Street movement against economic inequality.
- The **Danish** [Roskilde Festival Creative](#) exemplifies resisting the existing hegemony of market-managerialist organisations through its More Than Music initiative. Each year, this festival amasses creative professionals, activists, and social entrepreneurs to function as an open and co-creative laboratory to challenge those politically restrictive parameters and enable the testing of new ideas (Harrebye, 2015).
- **Macau’s** “[The New Centre for Arts, Culture and Research of Milan](#)” represents creative activism emerging as an organisation and cultural institution to engage in broad political, social, and

cultural issues in all aspects using creative and discursive practices.

- In addition, two resource centres provide ample case studies of digital creative activism: one is [The Commons Social Change Library](#), an online collection of educational resources on creative activism and social movements; the other is the [Actipedia](#) of [The Centre for Artistic Activism](#), a research agency specialised in creative activism.

### ***Creative participatory activities***

In addition to the above case study approach, we recommend a few (co-)creative and participatory activities adaptable to different class settings such as tutorials, workshops, or field studies outside classrooms (e.g., visiting museums, art galleries and creative spaces). The activities suggested below embody the theoretical essence of creative pedagogy that empowers students to co-create and co-own learning, unleash creative potentials, and become confident, engaged, and progressive thinkers (Hay et al., 2020). Specifically, these activities have applied the creative pedagogy of playfulness, hope, and possibilities to build an enjoyable, delightful, and meaningful learning environment for serious topics like activism and social justice. From the feedback we received from prior students, the activities that follow have generated increased motivation, purposeful engagement, experiential learning, and social empowerment over time.

- ***If You Are a Superhero***: This is an individual activity. Educators ask each student to imagine him/herself as a superhero who can save the world from a deep trouble. The superhero identifies a big problem within society that threatens citizens or public interest, but s/he has superpower to transmit (communicate) his/her thoughts to other people's minds and influence them to join allies for collective

action. Educators then ask students to note their imagination on paper, for example, drawing him/herself a heroic image in a unique outfit, explaining the issue (why it matters), and mapping out their approaches, strategies, tactics (where PR theories apply) and channels (e.g., social/digital platforms) to magically disseminate the key message(s) in creative formats (e.g., texts, posters, poems, songs, symbols, memes).

- ***Imagining Roads to Utopia***: This is designed as a group activity. Educators advise students that to change the world we live in we need to be able to imagine an ideal world we desire. Then divide students in groups of four or five. In each group, members brainstorm and rank the issues that concern them. Targeting each issue, the team collectively imagines innovative ways to raise public awareness, influence their attitudes, and mobilise the desired behaviour change. In this process, educators guide students to sketch their visions, review the professional communication and creative skills of each member within the team, help them to agree about an actionable plan and turn at least part of their utopian dreams into reality.

- ***Everyday Life Performance (mini-theatre play)***: While this group activity combines the creative teaching methods of dramatising and role-play, its development needs collaboration and support from colleagues with diverse disciplinary backgrounds in creative practices. Educators ask students to set a scene of everyday life, for example, at the bus top or on a dinner table with family, and then students play different roles, speaking in others' voices about a common issue/topic (e.g., vegetarianism, animal rights). The performance is process-oriented to show how students use different resources and communication techniques to persuade, influence, and engage others in a negotiated, collective action.

This activity requires a few weeks for students to plan together and co-write the performance scripts for different characters and roles. It is both a challenging and rewarding experience for students to explore different ideas for an activism cause.

- **Speculative Fiction/Storytelling:** This activity idea was inspired by Doyle's (2020) study into creative education about climate change. Speculative fiction is used as a narrative framing device to help young people develop their stories about promoting a social cause (e.g., climate change) based on their current perceptions of the issue (i.e., what needs to be changed) and imaginative future-thinking (i.e., what the future would look like after activism). For example, *FutureCoast Youth* is a UK-based creative climate project inviting 14- to 15-year-old high school students to use participatory play and imaginative storytelling to create their own ideas of current and future climate issues. Using such speculative fiction, students develop and visualise scenarios of climatically altered futures and thus prepare for future climate changes (see details of the *FutureCoast Youth* project, in Doyle, 2020).

- **Field/Ethnographic Studies:** This activity should be planned as a pedagogical event for a few days or weeks to take students outside the classroom to real-world creative spaces, such as cultural centres or local communities, so that students can learn creative activism everywhere (Hay et al., 2020). As part of experiential learning, those events provide students with real-life opportunities to be involved in activism and community action projects and gain experiences that last long after the semester ends. To be sustainable, this activity is best if institutionally sponsored.

Public relations educators can refer to the two models [House of Imagination](#) and [Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination](#) for resource

implications (Hay et al., 2020).

***Diversify evaluation/assessments***

In line with creative pedagogy, we recommend diversifying assessment types, structures, and evaluation criteria to nourish student curiosity and creativity when they are educated about public relations as activism. Apart from informative assessments such as weekly reflective journals, critical essays, small games, or quizzes, we also suggest two summative assessments:

- *Creating a case study portfolio* of activist public relations (individual assessment). This assignment can be divided to two parts: (1) Ask students to choose a case study of issue-based creative activism and collect as many proofs and artifacts (e.g., posters, images, videos) as possible to build a portfolio; and (2) Ask students to write an evidence-based report to critically evaluate both pragmatic and aesthetic impacts of the case study, and reflectively suggest future improvement.
- *Collective project-making* of creative activism, with guidance from external advisors (e.g., artists, activists, cultural curators, public relations practitioners) (groupwork). This involves collaboration between universities, arts/culture centres, and public relations agencies. Each project should be led by a small group (5 or 6 students) working with an assigned advisor in a specific location. Students collectively develop an activism campaign proposal based on public relations knowledge involving issue management, SWOT analyses, audience segmentation, key messaging, relationship building, promotional mix, creative tactics (e.g., animation, comics, storytelling), social/digital platforms, implementation techniques, timeline, budget, and evaluation. In addition to the written project, students will also have opportunities to showcase their works in cultural venues (e.g., in an art gallery

as a partner organisation) facing external audiences. If funding is available, universities or culture centres can create a website to host student works and boost their visibility and social impact.

**Concluding remarks: *Creativity is key***

As one of the first attempts to explore the intersection of public relations, activism and creative pedagogy, our article contributes to addressing a shortcoming that exists commonly in activist public relations education: the lack of creativity in both learning content design and delivery. We note that, although public relations is increasingly conflated with activism, the research into teaching activist public relations is at an early stage of identifying the gap or calling for action. For example, Coombs and Holladay (2012) articulate the absence of activism from public relations history education as a glaring omission. Fitch and L'Etang (2020) find little growth in universities adding activism to public relations education in that it remains largely concerned with graduate outcomes, industry trends and future demands. Mules (2019; 2021) thus argues that activism studies should have a space in public relations curricula. Given the traditional teaching of activism as confrontation and protestation based on orthodox theories and case studies that can be emotionally draining, educators need to explore creative ways and practical steps to make the learning of activist public relations more appealing and engaging.

We contend that the dual creativity applied to both learning content design (what to teach) and delivery (how to teach and facilitate learning) is essential to motivate students to learn and value activism within public relations classrooms and beyond. On the one hand, we recommend that public relations educators adopt creative activism as a content framework, which is crucial to help students extensively understand activism as an important discursive marker of varying creativity. Applying creative activism to public relations course content may not necessarily equip students with artistic skills but will expose them to the means of locating

a rich, diverse, and dynamic world of activism to eventually apply to achieving positive social change. At university, once a semester ends and all the applied learning within one's degree is covered, we should still leave room for students to continue imagining, exploring, and dreaming of their desired world of social justice (Alexander et al., 2021).

On the other hand, we encourage public relations educators to experiment with creative pedagogy to not only effectively deliver the creative content but more importantly, to make available a collaborative and enjoyable learning environment. Within such a setting, student curiosity, risk-taking, positive thinking, and problem-solving can encourage them to approach and appreciate activism for social change. Specifically, the creative pedagogy applicable to activist public relations education includes a pedagogy of playfulness, exploring play and fun as a way of deep learning, and using student emotions to improve learning (Duncombe, 2016). Another useful idea is the pedagogy of hope and possibilities that unveils different opportunities, regardless of the obstacles to social change (Freire, 2004). Such creative pedagogy that develops students as co-creators, co-enquirers, and co-owners of learning is useful to overcome such potential negative impact as students' reduced sense of efficacy after long exposure to heavy-hearted and violent case studies from radical activism (Doyle, 2020).

Informed by the creative pedagogical framework mentioned earlier and what we have learned from our own teaching experience, this article invited public relations educators to conduct a few experiments to make learning happen. We suggested applying creativity to teaching and learning when building the course content by selecting inspirational case studies, designing enjoyable activities, and assessing students in ways conducive with creative learning content. We hope that the examples provided in this article will become useful resources adaptable to different contexts, or at least spark thoughts and imagination from educators around the world.

Also, we must admit that those creative pedagogical approaches require substantial time and resource investment to build trust and creativity, and overcome challenges in interdisciplinary collaboration, especially when building partnerships between universities, culture centres, activist groups/organisations, and local communities.

Nevertheless, we should trust that adding creativity to the teaching of activism within public relations classrooms and beyond will facilitate more “knowledge construction that is necessary for disciplinary progress” (Macnamara, 2015, p. 344). This will offer the wider community greater access to the emancipation possible through activist public relations.

Through educating young generations of the relevance and significance of activism, we empower them to imagine and explore new alternatives, to question society’s discrimination and inequality, and thus reshape their own identities and futures. We seek to cultivate students to be the future leaders and changemakers, rather than merely public relations technicians or managers. As public relations educators, we may continue to be bound by different rules and institutional constraints, but we can still exercise our own agency to reconcile multiple conflicting values to find feasible and creative ways of teaching activism. Taking this point of departure, we call for future empirical research to test and evaluate the efficacy of the theoretically informed, creative pedagogical practices mentioned in this article. Creativity is key.

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## **Appendix 1. An initial list of teaching resources and recommended readings**

### **Textbooks:**

Rubin, R.L. (2018). *Creative activism: Conversations on music, film, literature, and other radical Arts*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/creative-activism-9781501337215/>

Mutsvairo, B. (2016). *Digital activism in the social media era: Critical reflections on emerging trends in sub-Saharan Africa*. Cham: Springer

International Publishing. [https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%](https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-40949-8)

[2F978-3-319-40949-8](https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-319-40949-8)

Frey, L. & Palmer, D. (2014). *Teaching communication activism: Communication education for social justice*. New York: Hampton

Press Inc. [http://www.hamptonpress.com/Merchant2/merchant.](http://www.hamptonpress.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=978-1-61289-134-7)

[mvc?Screen=PROD&Product\\_Code=978-1-61289-134-7](http://www.hamptonpress.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=978-1-61289-134-7)

### **The Conversation essays:**

Suwito, K.A. (2020). Art and online activism amid the pandemic: Lessons from around the world. Retrieved from [https://theconversation.com/](https://theconversation.com/art-and-online-activism-amid-the-pandemic-lessons-from-around-the-world-140161)

[art-and-online-activism-amid-the-pandemic-lessons-from-around-the-world-140161](https://theconversation.com/art-and-online-activism-amid-the-pandemic-lessons-from-around-the-world-140161)

### **Case study books:**

Adi, A. (2018). *Protest public relations: Communicating dissent and activism*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge. <https://www>.



[routledge.com/Protest-Public-Relations-Communicating-dissent-and-activism/Adi/p/book/9780367664985](https://www.routledge.com/Protest-Public-Relations-Communicating-dissent-and-activism/Adi/p/book/9780367664985)

Hancox, D. (2021). *The revolution of transmedia storytelling through place: Pervasive, ambient and situated*. London and New York: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/The-Revolution-in-Transmedia-Storytelling-through-Place-Pervasive-Ambient/Hancox/p/book/9780367222383>

Swann, P. (2020). *Cases in public relations management: The rise of social media and activism* (3rd ed). New York; Oxfordshire, England: Routledge. <https://www.routledge.com/Cases-in-Public-Relations-Management-The-Rise-of-Social-Media-and-Activism/Swann/p/book/9781138088870>

**TED talks and YouTube links:**

[TED talk: How to Start a Social Movement | Tamara Richardson | TEDxUQ](#)

[Changemaker Chat with Jeremy Heimans](#)

[TED talk: What new power looks like](#)

[Changemakers #21: The People v Twitter trolls](#)

[Building 21st Century Movements](#)