GIFTS

"PR in Real Time": A Problem-Based Approach to Generating Engagement and Learning

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Rationale

"PR in Real Time" is a weekly, problem-based learning activity that provides an opportunity for students to utilize critical thinking skills as they apply course concepts to real-world challenges throughout the semester. The activity promotes student engagement at the outset of class, fosters community in the classroom, draws attention to current events and reliable resources for industry news, and connects course material to tangible, everyday examples. It has been used successfully in an introductory Public Relations Principles course for both in-person instruction and synchronous online delivery.

The activity draws upon AEJMC teaching monographs regarding the use of real-life problems in the PR classroom (Fischer, 1997) and problem-based learning research literature, which articulates a focus on teaching basic competencies of a subject within the framework of authentic scenarios (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Norman & Schmidt, 2000). It also incorporates elements of the Think-Pair-Share instructional technique (Lyman, 1981).

"PR in Real Time" begins with the instructor presenting a current public relations issue taken from a news outlet or an industry blog. After providing background information on the issue, the instructor poses three to four strategic questions. Examples of potential questions include the

following: Which stakeholders does this issue affect? Are there any ethical considerations that need to be considered in this situation? Which PR theories might apply in this scenario? Regardless of the issue, each activity includes a final question that asks students how they would manage the situation.

Students have a moment to consider the day's discussion questions before exchanging their responses in small peer groups. This initial small-group environment offers a more comfortable discussion space, which has been shown to generate more and better discussion in a larger setting (Barkley et al., 2014). Students are asked to work with the students sitting around them. Typically, students tend to sit in the same seats throughout the semester even without formal seating assignments. Therefore, a natural byproduct of "PR in Real Time" is that it fosters relationships within the classroom.

Following the small-group interactions, students report back on their conversations during a collective discussion of the day's questions. Responses are cataloged on the white board in an effort to affirm student contributions and to provide a visual reminder of the many considerations and potential solutions PR practitioners navigate when addressing an issue. The discussion concludes with the instructor providing takeaways from industry sources, course materials, and their own expertise. There is often overlap between the class responses and these predetermined takeaways, which provides an added opportunity to highlight student success.

Careful consideration is given to topic selection throughout the semester in order to incorporate a range of industries (nonprofit, corporate, agency), professional interest areas (crisis communication, employee communication, travel and tourism), and identities (among leaders, employees, and stakeholders). As students become accustomed to the types of subjects that work well for the activity, they are invited to

submit their own topic ideas using a Google Form. This helps to further engage students in the learning process, to tap into their respective areas of interest, and to diversify course content.

Student Learning Goals

- Apply foundational public relations concepts to real-world situations
- Identify the relevant stakeholders involved in everyday public relations issues
- Evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of various responses to public relations issues
- Formulate strategic solutions to open-ended problems
- Articulate and support a chosen solution among peers using oral communication

Connection to Public Relations Practice

This activity centers on current events that have a substantial public relations focus. Weekly topic selection allows for consideration of a variety of applicable PR concepts throughout the course of a semester. Meanwhile, the questions asked of students during the exercise and the takeaways provided at the conclusion of the activity allow the instructor to highlight relevant subject matter being taught in the course. While crisis communication scenarios tend to be a reliable source of student engagement, it is important to provide students with exposure to a broad range of PR responsibilities.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

"PR in Real Time" provides perhaps the clearest evidence of student learning over the course of a semester. As the semester progresses, these weekly discussions become more nuanced and increasingly incorporate relevant public relations concepts. Meanwhile, students who have completed the course often mention "PR in Real Time" as their favorite activity and reference specific discussions they enjoyed.

Teaching observations have further supported the value of "PR in

Real Time" for student learning. A senior colleague described the activity and its outcomes in the following manner during a peer evaluation of my teaching in a synchronous online course:

Using Zoom's poll function, Dr. Taylor got the class involved in a discussion of how Gorilla Glue could use the PR principles they'd been learning to respond. Should they respond at all, he asked (45% said yes, 55% said no). Moving on to legal and moral implications, Dr. Taylor let students propose options, including philanthropy (helping her with medical bills and using that fact in their ads), updating the existing warning label, issuing a "holding statement," using social media, and others. Given that it is still only the third week of the semester, the students' knowledge, and their ability to apply what they'd learned, were impressive.

References

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Appendix

Example of Activity

"PR in Real Time": Fake Phishing Email

Background

First, students are provided with background information about the story using an Associated Press news story. Screenshots of the story are shared in a Google Slides presentation that is projected at the front of the classroom.

The Associated Press (Associated Press, 2022) reports the following:

"Officials at Oregon Health & Science University have apologized to employees after a fake phishing test drew complaints about raising false hopes.

The university sent the phishing test email to employees on April 12 offering up to $7,500 in financial assistance, Portland television station KGW (8) reported Thursday.

The email, from a 'benefit@ohsu.edu' address, read in part: 'In response to the current community hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Oregon Health & Science University has decided to assist all employees in getting through these difficult times.' It included a link where respondents could 'register' for COVID-related benefits.

But the offer was not real — it was a test intended to measure employees' cybersecurity awareness and OHSU's own technology systems. The test was sent several days after the university sent a message to employees warning them about suspicious emails. The phishing test was met with frustration from some employees."

Public Response

Next, students are shown a rundown of national headlines the story generated and a selection of social media posts that illustrate the magnitude of the issue and the negative attention it attracted. Again, screenshots of these items are projected at the front of the classroom. An example of a Twitter response is as follows: "my university sent an email about providing $7,500 in assistance to those experiencing financial hardship due to the pandemic....turns out it was a PHISHING exercise... is this a joke???" (Luong, 2022).

Discussion

Having the necessary background context, students are now asked to consider a series of questions about this issue that are projected at the front of the classroom so they have them as a guide. Students are provided a moment for personal reflection before meeting in small groups to discuss their answers.

Questions to Consider:
- What is your emotional reaction to this situation?
- What would you want your employer to say or do in response to this?
- Which area(s) of public relations are most relevant to this situation?
- Which stakeholders should we consider as we plan our response?

Following the small-group discussions, the class reviews each question collectively. Student responses are written on the white board by the instructor throughout this discussion.

Takeaways

The activity concludes with the instructor providing outcomes and takeaways. These include the following:
- The organization's statement: "This week, as part of OHSU's regular exercises to help members practice spotting suspicious emails, the language in the test email was taken verbatim from the actual phishing email to ensure no one else fell for the scam. That was a mistake. The real scam was insensitive and exploitative of OHSU members - and the attempt to educate members felt the same way, causing confusion and concern. We sincerely apologize to the OHSU community."
- Analysis from "The Daily Scoop" blog: "OHSU's response includes a direct apology to the community affected by the exercise and validates the emotional response of many critics. However, the university did not address the issue on social media, where much of the backlash is still lingering. It's a good reminder to meet your audience where they are, especially in times of comms crisis."

- The professor's takeaways:
  - The importance of internal communication
  - Internal communication can quickly become external communication
  - Integrated communication: work together with other departments in an organization
- Takeaways from the textbook:
  - "Evaluating Employee Communication:
  Measure and evaluate how communication reaches internal publics, as you would with any PR campaign. Consider your messaging outputs, outtakes, and outcomes.
    - Was it well timed?
    - Was the content truthful and accurate?
    - Did it have relevance for the specific receivers?
    - Was it accessed and read or reviewed?
    - Did it result in its objectives (inform, shape opinion, or encourage behavior)?" (Page and Parnell, 2017, p. 258).