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Making the ROPE Process Real: Using Time Cards to Analyze Student Knowledge and Implementation of the ROPE Process in the Public Relations and Advertising Campaign

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In many universities, the public relations or advertising campaigns course is the senior-level capstone course for majors specializing in those areas. Prior to reaching this final stage in their education, many public relations students are introduced to the concepts of research, objectives, programming, and evaluation (the ROPE acronym) to describe the process of public relations campaign development and planning. For advertising students, faculty members introduce a similar acronym—RACE—to describe the four-step process of research, action, communication, and evaluation for creating advertising campaigns. Yet limited work has been done to understand how future practitioners (current students) understand and apply the steps in the ROPE process. Additionally, little research has been found that examines how much time is allotted to these steps in campaigns classes as compared to recommended time allocations by practitioners. The purpose of this pilot project is two-fold: first, to know how students apply the ideas contained in the ROPE process and second, to determine how students are allocating their time to create campaign plans.

Introduction

For many colleges and universities, the public relations or advertising campaigns course is the senior-level capstone experience for majors specializing in those areas. As such, it is the primary course in which students can demonstrate their abilities to process and utilize all of the information learned in previous courses (Stuhlfault & Berman, 2010). The majority of these courses follow a business model, where the students are required to adhere to a client-created case when creating a campaign plan book for a client and, in some cases, actually implement their recommendations. The experience, therefore, is an expression of their abilities to succeed in their chosen field and through taking on a real-world client, the students participate in experiential learning, which allows them to discover how to apply

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theories and may motivate learning outside the traditional classroom (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000; Hawtrey, 2007; Hunter, 2007; Scovotti & Spiller, 2009;).

Four- and five-letter acronyms are abundant in public relations and advertising campaign planning. These four (or five) letters define the logical lockstep process by which public relations and advertising practitioners analyze, conceive, plan, evaluate, and critique a strategic communication campaign. The process enables practitioners to not only determine success and failure of campaigns, but also to identify areas of improvement and opportunities for future campaigns. Scholars such as Kelly (2001) have noted that these models explain how relationships with publics should be managed. With most research on public relations campaigns focusing on the use of service learning in the curriculum, a gap is found regarding the application of the process and implication of time management in the campaign planning. Few scholars have written explicitly about applying ROPE to the campaign process or have probed the time constraints of each step, thus the impetus for this project. Limited work has been done to understand how future practitioners, who are current students, understand and conceptualize these steps or to know how much time is allotted to these steps in campaigns classes. The purpose of this project is two-fold: first, to discover how students perceive these ideas contained in the four- or five-letter process and second, to determine how students use their time to create these campaign plans.

Review of Relevant Literature

An Overview of Experiential Learning

Before discussing the process and application in the campaigns course, it is essential to understand some foundational elements of service learning in order to provide the appropriate context for the campaigns course. Experiential learning, which includes service learning, involves asking the students to learn through active involvement, reflection (usually through journaling) and analysis of their experiences. While the literature surrounding experiential learning has grown in recent years, the idea of practical training has been embedded in media education (Brandon, 2002). In fact, Feldman (1995) found that the hands-on experiential learning opportunities found in journalism schools had a positive impact on future employment in media occupations.

Experiential learning has its origins in Dewey's (1938) belief that experience provided students with an immediate situation in which to apply knowledge (Brandon, 2002; Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This application allowed for the exploration of knowledge to wider experiences. Since this early notion, the application of and research surrounding experiential learning has evolved to include reflection (Lewin, 1951), cyclical nature (Joplin, 1985), and a holistic structure, transformative process and self-regulation (Kolb, 1984).

While proponents of experiential learning tout its utility for enhancing practical professional training, strengthening critical thinking, and developing problem-solving skills (Maudsley & Strivens, 2000), opponents to the approach argue that experiential learning is a less effective instructional approach (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). However, even those unconvinced of the effectiveness of experiential learning are willing to concede that, when learners "have sufficiently high prior knowledge to provide 'internal' guidance," then experiential learning can be effective (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006, p. 75). Given that the public relations and advertising campaigns courses are often the capstone course at universities, these courses should be populated with students who are willing and able to prosper in the experiential-learning setting.

Skills for the Public Relations Campaigns Course

According to Hardin and Pompper (2004), "Ensuring that students are adequately prepared for public relations careers is of paramount importance" (p. 358). In this applied and pragmatic discipline, several documents have guided the construction of public relations classes so that students' needs complement industry needs. The latest set of standards, the 2006 report issued by the Commission on Public Relations Education, introduced a new set of curriculum guidelines, which called for a public relations campaigns course that attaches communication tactics to actual strategy and into the social, political, and economic contexts of the situation (Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, & Terrell, 1993; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Farmer, 1997).

Yet, Gower and Reber (2006) found that students had a dissonance between perceived importance and perceived preparation on all technical skills, including campaigns. The students in their study, "rated their preparation as significantly less than the perceived importance" (p. 189). One area of concern for students was the skills needed to create campaigns. In terms of the advertising and public relations curriculum, the campaigns course is a critical juncture for most students because it is their final step before entering the full-time public relations workforce. As the capstone course, countered Silverman (2007), the class combines instruction with the opportunity to work with real clients in the design and possible implementation of a campaign.

Four-Step Processes

Most public relations textbooks at the introductory and capstone level introduce and discuss the idea of the four-step process for strategic communication. Coombs and Holladay (2010), and Kelly (2001) expanded the process to include a fifth step; for Coombs and Holladay, the new step—environmental scanning—occurs prior to the research step. The addition of this step situates public relations within a larger context by encouraging practitioners to strategically gather information from publics regarding topics related to the client or campaign. In addition, Kelly (2001) argued an additional step following evaluation: stewardship in order to continue to cultivate relationships begun with the campaign.

ROPE. For the purposes of this paper, the researchers are using the ROPE process as outlined in Hendrix (1998) and Hendrix and Hayes (2010). Hendrix (1998) introduced the concept of ROPE, an acronym for the four-step public relations process that stands for research, objectives, programming, and evaluation. The public relations process starts with research; in this phase of the process, the focus is understanding three key elements: the client institution, the problem or concern, and the publics with which the client organization must communicate. The next step is the setting of campaign objectives to solve the problem. Following objectives is the programming step, in which the teams plan and implement the campaign objectives and program, and the final step is evaluation, a series of program evaluations to determine if the campaign objectives were achieved. A few studies have found that, on average, practitioners in the field spend 12% of their time on research, 15% of their time on setting objectives, 48% of their time on programming and 9% on evaluation regarding campaigns (Kelly, 1998, 2001). Wood mentions that fundraising campaigns are allocated along the lines of 60% cultivation, 25% research, 10% stewardship and 5% solicitation (quoted in Kelly 1998).

RACE. The RACE acronym follows the same process as the ROPE acronym, but uses the concepts of research, action, communication, and evaluation to describe the process of public relations.

Research Question

Based on the literature outlined and the deficiencies described, the researchers propose the following research question: How do advertising and public relations students spend their time when conducting a campaign under the ROPE/RACE theory of the campaign process?

Method

The initial data gathered for and analyzed in this paper was the pilot study for a larger data set. The pilot data was gathered using one campaigns class at one of the universities from which the larger data sample was in the process of being collected. To collect the data used for both the pilot study and the larger data set, the researchers used quantitative surveys in the form of time cards. One of the professors taught a capstone campaigns course at a large, public university, and all students were told during the first class and in the syllabus about the assignment. Students received the documents electronically at the beginning of the semester and were walked through the process of recording their time and tasks during that meeting session. If there were questions on how to fill out parts of the time card, they were discussed in front of the entire class. After that session, the students were expected to complete the time card on their own and turn it into the professor by the specified weekly deadline.

Sample

The sample for this pilot study consisted of undergraduates enrolled in an advertising campaigns class from a large southeastern university. While participation was voluntary, all students enrolled in the course participated. The course is offered in the Fall and Spring semester with enrollment ranging from 8-20 students per section for each 16-week semester. There were a total of 10 students who participated in this study.

Instrument

The time card used was a simplified and modified version of a Microsoft Excel time card template spreadsheet that was retrieved online. The spreadsheet file provided to the students consisted of two separate sheets. The first sheet tab consisted of the actual time card and the second sheet tab was the project codes acronyms (both ROPE and RACE) with the acronyms' full words spelled out. For example, the students could look up what the "O" or "A" in the formulas, see what the letters stood for, and get an example of things that could be coded under that project code. The second sheet tab served as a reminder for students in case he or she needed refreshers about the acronyms throughout the semester.

Procedure

The students completed the time card, noting how much time was spent working on each area of the four-step process and detailing specific tasks. For example, a student who conducted research described the research as "interviews" or "online research about client issue." If a student spent a total of 10 hours working on the campaign in one week, his/her total hours on the time card would equal 10. However, he or she was also asked to assign his or her time by RACE/ROPE task; therefore the 10 hours could have been spent with 5.5 hours for research-centered tasks, 2.5 hours toward action/objective tasks and 2 hours toward communication/planning tasks. The time cards were due to the class professor by a specified time each week. Time card data was not collected for the first week of classes.

Findings

The data collected was analyzed to answer the primary research question: How do advertising and public relations students spend their time when conducting a campaign under the ROPE/RACE theory of the campaign process? Overall, the findings indicate that students may not fully understand how the ROPE process connects to actual practice of conducting a campaign or working on a campaign plan book. Additionally, they may also not understand the importance of keeping track of how much time they allocate to each stage of a campaign for a client in a classroom setting. Perhaps a bit more disconcerting is the amount of overall time spent on the campaign in connection to the amount of time expected per class.

Regarding the overall time spent on the project, reported student time ranged from 16.5 hours to 171.8 hours for the entire semester. The majority of the students reported between 30-50 hours overall. This would fall below the recommended 2-3 hours of weekly homework for each credit hour of class. All students reported having participated in research, totaling 244.77 hours. This represented approximately 43% of the time spent on the campaign, compared to the practitioners' 12% of their time spent on the research stage of a campaign. The majority of the research hours (ranging from a combined 17 to 53 hours a week) were spent during the first 6 weeks of time cards. After time card 6, research hours steadily declined. By the 10th time card, only one student was still reporting hours for research.

Students reported spending 250.2 hours, 44% of their time, on the objective phase of the campaign, compared to 15% by practitioners. There did not appear to be a clear stopping of this phase with large amounts of time spent on it ranging from week 1 to week 12. Three students reported that they continued in this phase until the end of the campaign. The most significant time spent was approximately 54 hours during week three. As with the research phase, students reported working on campaign objectives throughout the entire campaign. However, time reported did drop off during the final weeks of the semester, with only two students still recording work on this phase.

Kelly (2001) found that practitioners spent 48% of their time on the programming phase of the campaign, yet this was not the case with the students in this study. In fact, programming only accounted for approximately 12% of the students' time. Additionally, one student reported spending no time at all on planning. As to be expected, no hours of programming were reported during the first two time cards. There was an increase in time spent on the programming phase during the week of the on-campus promotional events (ranging from 18 to 24 hours). Additionally, some students reported programming hours after the events had been completed.

Evaluation may be an area where students do not quite understand how the acronym guiding the process fits into the actual implementation of a campaign. Of the students who turned in time cards, only 3 students reported spending time on evaluating the campaign although the professor involved in the campaign noted a specific period of evaluation during the class. The time spent on implementation accounted for 7.5 of the total hours (approximately 1%) reported and occurred during the final weeks of the class, after the on-campus promotion occurred. This 1% is significantly below the practitioner's expected 9% of campaign time spent on this phase.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, there appears to be somewhat of a disconnect between students learning the ROPE/RACE process and how to apply that process to the actual creation of a campaign. The majority of students in this study appear to understand that research and objectives are essential at the start of campaigns, but they do not know when to stop. The researchers believe that the significant amount of time spent on the research portion of the campaign could be a remnant from the campaign being conducted in an academic setting where research is considered the norm and students work to satisfy the professor, not a client. In fact, many university campaigns courses do not implement the campaign, which could further stress the importance of research over programming. However, allowing the students to focus so much of their time on research without teaching them when to stop will not serve them well in a professional setting.

Some of the research hours reported after the campaign was conducted could represent the students' confusion separating the evaluation stage from the research stage. The inability to separate the two functions in the public relations process might demonstrate a lack of understanding about what evaluation is or the students' overgeneralizing the concept of research. As part of their evaluation, the students did conduct a survey after the on-campus promotion to assess if their goals were reached, but the majority of the students reported those hours as research hours, not evaluation hours. Students may need increased explanation in classes to determine how to separate the beginning research function from the evaluation function and how the data from both are analyzed.

Perhaps a bit more disconcerting is the amount of time spent overall on the campaign in connection to the amount of time expected per class. The student reported hours definitely show that some of the students were contributing significantly more time than others. This may contribute to students' dislike for group projects and support, somewhat, claims of some group members not carrying their weight. Of course, this finding could also just be a reflection of the type of student that enrolled in the class at the time the data was gathered. A recommendation for those professors who will use the time card format is to receive, document, and discuss time cards weekly to ensure that such confusion and dissatisfaction do not take place in the group dynamic.

When comparing student campaign time allocations to those of professionals, there is a definite difference. Students appear to be mired in the first two phases of the campaign, representing 87% of the time spent in the campaigns class. Practitioners spend only 27% of their time on those two phases. Practitioners seem to spend more time on the programming phase, which is the one phase that may or may not be actually implemented, depending on the client's requests and the course requirements. This shows an incongruity between university practices and real-world needs. Perhaps future campaigns courses should include a programming element in their capstone course, which could help prepare the students for their first job.

Even when the programming phase is included in the course, students seem to feel they spend less time on it than the other parts of the campaign. While this could be that students really do spend more time on the academically expected parts of the campaign than this part, they could report lower numbers here because the programming part is seen as fun and not class work. If this is the case, students may not accurately report their programming hours of "fun."

While the time dedicated to the evaluation phase is not same for practitioners and students, it is the phase that students come closest to the time allocations of the practitioners in the real world. However, the numbers are still not close enough to point toward students fully understanding the ROPE process or being in line with what will be expected of them in the workplace.

The results of this study point to some pedagogical implications for faculty teaching advertising and public relations. One of the key areas that need to be explained is how to differentiate between research and evaluation. Perhaps a clearer, universally accepted, series of talking points would be useful. It is also evident that faculty may want to spend more time discussing when to stop researching at the beginning of the campaign. It appears that these students are not quite prepared with the critical skills to determine an end point to the research phase. As with many university courses, students in the campaigns classes experienced different time commitments to both the class and the project, despite faculty expectations. In order to assist students in determining the expected level of commitment to the course, faculty should be clear regarding how much time is required for student success. This required time could be explained in terms of minimum and maximum allocations and projected impact on the grade, while being clear that faculty are not just counting hours, but also looking for quality output.

There are some limitations to this study. Perhaps the most obvious one is that the results are limited to a small and specific grouping of students at a specific point in their education. The enrollment in classes was based on where the students were in their respective programs, not their GPA. Therefore, this group of students may not be representative of advertising and public relations students as a whole. While that makes it impossible to generalize the findings, the study offers valuable guidance that is applicable for others. Additionally, some of the students reported time, but did not itemize the task on which they were working. This made it impossible for the researchers to verify if the code they reported truly fit the phase of the ROPE process indicated. Finally, there is always the possibility that the students in this study may not have been fully committed to the recording of their time and therefore may have either made up data or provided "best estimates" on the time cards. If the students saw the time card as "busy work," they may have even decided to not complete the assignment at all.

Overall, this study shows that there is a disconnect between students learning of the theory of the campaigns process and the actual time spent on a campaign in a classroom setting and the workplace. Advertising and public relations students and faculty need to think more about how the theory can be applied and communicated to bring the elements more in line with what their future employers will expect.

The current study made no attempt to connect student grades to the amount of time spent on the project. Perhaps that could reveal if students with higher grades are closer to practitioners in their understanding, application and implementation of the ROPE process. Additionally, hours reported were not compared to journals that students kept as part of the class. Therefore, future research could examine whether there is a connection between grades and time spent on the campaign and student satisfaction with the course and/or project and time spent. Future research could also endeavor to determine if current students perform more in line with the ROPE process and time allocation as the transition into a work setting.

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