Teaching Crisis Communication Online Without Losing the Interactivity

Shana Meganck and Rowena Winkler

James Madison University and Vectorworks

Changing the format of a course is always a stressful process for instructors, especially when you are taking it out of a traditional classroom setting and moving it online. While this is happening more and more every year, there is much debate around whether you can truly recreate the interactivity of a traditional classroom in an online environment. Therefore, when you have a course that requires extreme levels of interaction, such as crisis communication, there is a lot of thinking, debating, planning and reorganizing that goes into moving it online.

Setting up the course

Crisis communication teaches students techniques for dealing with sudden and unexpected situations that have a negative impact on organizations and their images to key constituencies. Through the course, students are provided with the insights, confidence and practical expertise needed to manage the consequences of a wide range of possible crises in ways that maintain, or even enhance, their employer's reputation.

The crisis communication course at Virginia Commonwealth University focused on two areas, crisis management and crisis communication. Through crisis management, students learned proven strategies and tactics with which to help organizations better understand, manage, and defuse crisis situations, whether internally or externally generated. Through crisis communication, students learned how to refine an organization's key messages for maximum impact and how to communicate effectively during a crisis to ensure those messages will be reported by the media and reach target audiences.

The course, which consisted of 20-25 students per semester, was conducted asynchronously through recorded lectures, online discussions and quizzes, and three assignments – analyzing a crisis case study, organizing a crisis plan and, the final group project, a crisis simulation exercise.

Final project details

Organizing lectures, online discussions, quizzes and individual assignments were easily transferable from the traditional classroom setting to the online classroom with slight alterations; however, the final crisis simulation exercise involved careful planning and consideration.

For the final class project, students were put in teams to simulate a real-life crisis communication situation. Each simulation team was required to respond to a crisis from the perspective of a particular organization (i.e., Centers for Disease Control, VCU Health, City of Richmond, Jefferson Hotel, Pan Pacific Airlines, Virginia Region Red Cross). Within

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each of the teams, the members had to agree on crisis team roles and complete several assignments.

There were three main parts of the final simulation exercise:

- Simulation Preparation: In order to prepare for the simulation exercise, each team had to meet virtually on a video-based platform of their choice and discuss crisis team roles within the group moving forward. Suggested team roles included two planners who were in charge of organizing group thoughts during the "Simulation Updates" phase and posting responses to each simulation update discussion post, a spokesperson and an assistant to the spokesperson who were in charge of writing the response statement due during the "Simulation Response" phase and producing the video response, and two writers who were in charge of organizing group thoughts and writing the final report. After they met virtually as a team, each team had to post a list of team roles and also post what virtual platform the group chose to use for meetings throughout the simulation process.

- Simulation Updates: For the second part of the assignment, teams were sent simulation updates throughout a one-week period. Each team had two days to read each update and respond to the discussion question posed at the end. These updates started with a disease outbreak that had hospitalized someone, requiring students to determine key messages for the organization they represented. The next update informed students that several other people started displaying symptoms, so they were required to start thinking through their crisis team members from the actual organization. The last update pronounced that one of the victims had died, necessitating a list of stakeholders for the organization each team was representing. The simulation updates were distributed from the instructor via the online portal used by VCU, Blackboard, and students responded in a discussion forum. The instructor reviewed each team's discussion posts and provided feedback to help with the final phase of the process, the "Simulation Response."

- Simulation Response: Based on the all of the simulation updates and feedback provided by the instructor, each team needed to create a final response report that incorporated a purpose statement, key publics, primary modes of communication, key messages, potential media questions with answers and an evaluation strategy for the

crisis response efforts as well as a recorded video response from the "spokesperson" with the organization's response to the crisis situation.

Along with the three main parts of the final simulation exercise, students were also required to fill out a peer evaluation form.

Learning Outcomes

For the course as a whole, there were several learning outcomes. The course helped students better understand the role and importance of public relations in crisis communication as well as how to understand and implement the main components of crisis communication, such as response strategies, crisis planning and messaging. The final crisis simulation exercise allowed students to participate in what felt like a real-life scenario in order to understand time pressures, group dynamics, unexpected developments and other issues that arise when an organization is faced with a crisis.

Past success and planning for the future: Moving a class online forces a change in dynamic. This change can be daunting for both students and teachers. Students worry about how to work in teams when they do not sit across the room face-to-face with their group members. Instructors worry that students will not be engaged and that student outcomes will suffer. However, despite these fears, this course and the final simulation exercise showcased how taking the face time out of the classroom experience does not have to lessen the interactivity, engagement and learning quality of the classroom experience.

Based on feedback, students felt that in the online environment, the instructor's classroom sessions were slightly less stimulating (4.44/5) than in the traditional environment (4.77/5); however, ideas were still expressed clearly (4.64/5). The students also felt that assignments were helpful in acquiring better understanding of course materials (4.64/5) and the course allowed them to learn from other students (4.64/5). Additionally, 100% of students said they would recommend the course to a friend.

From the instructor's perspective, students were engaged in online discussions and regularly reached out to the instructor with questions and comments. Students appeared to grasp the material based on assessments and were pleased with the interactivity in group exercises according to feedback received through peer evaluations. Lastly, the quality of final projects were strong, showcasing both an understand-

ing of the concepts presented in class as well as a high level of engagement amongst peer groups.

The online crisis communication class was offered five times at Virginia Commonwealth University, and some of the lessons learned from teaching this course, such as keeping consistency in online class exercises throughout the semester in order to help students stay organized and how to efficiently organize group discussion posts and encourage everyone to participate equally, were also implemented in the Introduction to Public Relations online course taught at VCU. Other lessons learned from teaching this course, such as the structure and interactivity of the final simulation exercise, were helpful in revising the traditional crisis communication class.

Moving forward, there is a need to consider how we can turn traditional classes into online classes without losing essential components, such as interactivity, in order to provide more opportunities for non-traditional students and give everyone access to education with less boundaries. The crisis communication class discussed here is a good example of how we can start doing this, but it's important to keep thinking and sharing ideas about how to best structure online courses and create innovative assessments and activities to make the transition from traditional to online easier for instructors willing to teach these courses, and make the overall experience more impactful for students.

Shana Meganck teaches public relations courses in the School of Communication Studies at James Madison University. Shana has a background in public relations and advertising, with nearly a decade of experience working at Richmond-based agencies with a variety of local and national clients, including Sprint Nextel and Altria. She can be reached at megancsl@jmu.edu.

Rowena Briones Winkler is a copywriter for the marketing department at Vectorworks, Inc., a global design and BIM solutions provider in Columbia, Maryland. There, she writes and edits copy for inbound marketing purposes, such as emails, case studies, blog posts, advertisements, and social media posts. In addition, she is the project manager for three e-newsletters that are sent to academic, national, and global users in the architecture, landscape, and entertainment industries.