



Embracing Public Relations Writing Techniques in the Classroom

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Abstract

Teaching public relations writing is challenging. Training good PR writers to be strategic, clear and concise, factual and direct often requires teachers to reframe the way students have been taught to write since grade school. Further, since there isn't just one way (style) to write in PR, teaching and learning the mechanics of good PR writing in the classroom poses several challenges that vary from class to class, student to student, and assignment to assignment. This paper discusses a learning-by-doing solution to these challenges stemming from Kolb's experiential learning theory to train better writers.

Introduction

Public relations educators and practitioners agree that writing is an essential skill. As Kathleen Lewton said, referring to the 2017 Commission on Public Relations Education report, "There was universal agreement that writing is more important than ever – even in a digital world – and students need not only be better writers, but to be able to write for all channels" (in Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018).

However, writing is noted as a difficult skill for PR students to master (Todd, 2009). Teaching students to be good PR writers means reframing the traditional writing approach they've been taught since grade school, and reprogramming them to write "effectively." The idea of effective writing points to the ability to write strategically for various publics using diverse writing styles (Todd, 2009). In other words, PR students must understand how to alter their writing to fit the audience and channel.

This type of strategic writing is often difficult for students to grasp because they must understand how to successfully use "language and symbols to meet

the variety of business and relationship demands that command attention daily" (Jacques, 2012). Additionally, as communication channels continue to evolve, so must communicators. At one time teaching PR writing focused on journalistic style and storytelling. Today's PR students must "write effectively in many different styles for all media" (Newsom & Haynes, 2011). As media channels and communication professionals continue to evolve, so must the teaching and learning done in classroom.

A Learning-By-Doing Approach

Teaching students effective PR writing means incorporating practice into every lesson. As Kolb (1984) said, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41).

According to Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT), this process of learning is accomplished through a four-stage learning cycle that includes encountering a new experience or situation, reflecting on

Keywords: Public Relations Writing, Experiential Learning Theory

the new experience, drawing conclusions and learning from the experience, and actively trying out what has been learned (McLeod, 2017). This is an ideal learning cycle where the learner encounters each base in a way that is responsive to both the learning environment and topic (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). As stated by Kolb & Kolb (2005), experiences lead to observations and reflections. The reflections generate abstract concepts which create implications that can be actively tested, leading to new experiences. Experiential learning is a nice fit for applied curriculums, such as PR, especially in terms of its ability to breakdown broader theories and concepts to more concrete skills that students can practice in the classroom (e.g., Fraustino, Briones, & Janoske, 2015; Todd, 2009; Wilson, 2012).

With ELT in mind, while telling students how to write effectively for PR helps provide context, the students should practice it repeatedly to truly grasp the skillset of writing for different audiences. Additionally, students should reflect on their writing to draw conclusions, learn from the experience, and understand its relevance. Tying explanation to relevance is a key approach for teaching effective PR writers.

Case Study

This paper focuses on three assignments used over several years (2015-2018) in a total of seven undergraduate PR writing sections that use ELT to pair a learning-by-doing assignment, reflection, and discussion with real-world application. These assignments were created by PR professionals to help bridge the gap in expectation between industry and academia.

1) Timed news release writing: News release writing is common in PR, and there is a traditional structure to writing a news release. However, PR writing courses often focus more on the structure than challenges of applying that structure to media-driven deadlines. The goal of this assignment lets students experience the structure of new release writing and the deadline-driven expectations of the industry. Prior to the assignment the instructor covers new release writing structure, newsworthiness, AP style, media research and pitching. Students are given a fact sheet about an organization, or allowed to choose an organization familiar to them. With a one-hour deadline students are challenged to write a single page release ready for publication. Afterward, the class reflects on the writing mechanics necessary to create a release and the experience of having to write well on deadline. Additionally, students peer edit and resubmit the

assignment for a revised grade similar to the review process practitioners follow before they distribute important communication.

2) Social media editorial calendar: This assignment highlights the differences between personal and strategic social media writing by requiring students to pre-plan a month of social media content for an organization. By conducting research on an organization of their choice, students explore how brands consistently use social media writing to connect with their audiences. Just like in the industry, students are challenged to plan and write social media content following strategic guidelines that include the consistent use of language, hashtags, and tone while adhering to content categories and brand standards. Prior to the assignment the class discusses the fundamentals of writing social media content with an organization's voice and the importance of having a content strategy. Students explore how platforms compare and differ, and how certain types of content and channels are more appropriate for audiences than others. After the assignment students reflect on the strategic writing approach, how the platforms worked, and the differences between personal (ad hoc) and professional (strategic) social media writing.

3) Guest blog post: There are two goals for teaching students to write well using a guest blog assignment. First, students must understand how longer-form writing through blogs can build an organization's expertise over time. Second, students learn the importance of audience analysis and pitching for select bloggers and influencers.

At the start of the assignment, students are instructed to choose a topic of interest and review multiple blogs that matched their thoughts on the topic while observing different styles of blog writing. Beforehand, the class discusses the foundation of blog writing and the importance of understanding a blog's audiences before pitching their post. After the assignment, students reflect on the process of identifying a blog, writing for that blog's audiences, and pitching the blog owner for publication. Students also compare short-form writing (like social media posts) and longer-form writing (blogs and website). This includes an analysis of outlets and topics, the importance of writing for a target audience and the challenges of being published. Due to the unpredictability of pitching and publishing, students who get their blog post published receive exemption from a future assignment.

Student Feedback

Using the ELT method, instructors observe well-rounded portfolios of written work from this class, as well as increased engagement due to the real-world expectations. Further, with approval from the Institutional Review Board, the following course evaluations reinforce the importance of ELT in PR writing classes.

Looking at the qualitative responses from evaluations, there is consistent acknowledgement for the relevance and “real-world” application of these assignments. For example, when asked “What did you like the most about this course?” one student said, “How it applied what I was learning to the real world.” Another student stated, “I really liked creating PR writing materials that are actually used in the industry.”

Another frequent observation is related to the learning-by-doing approach assignments. For example, one student remarked, “I loved how it was very hands-on and useful for our profession.” Another student mentioned that the course was “one of the only PR classes with actual real world preparation, not memorization.”

Additionally, students repeatedly mentioned how the course allows for reflection with instructor feedback. For example, one student stated, “She gives us the opportunity to do activities that help to solidify the information we just learned.” And another student mentioned what they liked most about the course is “the opportunity to work in class and get immediate feedback.”

Conclusion

The principles of good PR writing are multifaceted, evolving, and difficult to teach through a traditional approach. For students to be successful they must understand the strategic approaches to PR writing and the importance of media channel selection, tone, and audience analysis. The learn-by-doing approach to PR gives students a chance to learn through practice and reflection. The connection between learning and practice ensures educators teach students the most important skill to have before beginning a career in PR – the ability to write strategically.

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