

Critical Cultural Reflections for a Public Relations Writing Course

Purpose/Goals

Professional topics supersede in the classroom because of the immense focus on the practice of public relations and the professional skills required of entry-level practitioners (Hodges, 2013). Undergraduate public relations curricula often miss opportunities to expose students to critical and cultural perspectives (Hodges, 2013). With this activity, I sought to encourage public relations students to think about how configurations of power might influence their perspectives and how their writing materials might influence cultural expectations.

Idea

This assignment included a discussion and activity portion to expose students to basic critical/cultural perspectives of public relations and have them question their abilities to create, perpetuate, and/or disrupt cultural expectations. To achieve this, students discussed critical/cultural considerations of public relations and then critiqued the implications of their own writing choices.

Where it was used

This discussion/activity was used for two sections of a public relations techniques class (junior and senior students). Students in this class learn to write materials such as press releases, media advisories, white papers, feature stories, etc. Students also consider the media environments and relations that intersect with the creation and dissemination of these materials.

How it was implemented: Brief explanation

I chose to make this assignment an in-class activity so that students could grapple with these complex topics together and also receive guidance from me. I scheduled this activity at the end of the semester so that students could look to their major assignments for examples of how writing and language can speak to and/or refute cultural expectations.

[1] Before class, students read Edwards (2012) and submitted discussion posts about the idea of public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries.

[2] During class time, we reflected on the discussion posts, discussed critical perspectives of public relations, and shared definitions of culture at local and global levels (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Edwards, 2012; Pal & Dutta, 2008). We discussed questions such as “how do public relations practitioners influence societal discourses?” We parsed out tacit assumptions about experiences such as mental illness, motherhood, immigration, etc.

[3] After this lecture/discussion, we started the in-class activity. Students broke out into the client groups they have been working in for the entire semester. Each group is made up of three students who have written on behalf of a fictional client (either a pharmacy, a homeless shelter,

or a liberal arts college). I gave them the following guiding questions for their group discussions: what culture(s) does your organization operate within? What language did you use to label people or experiences? What expectations seemed natural or normal to you when writing or creating content? Although this was a group activity, each student questioned their own work for assumptions and/or norms with the help of their group members. I walked around to each group and asked questions about why they made certain writing decisions to help facilitate their reflections.

[4] After 10-15 minutes of discussion, some students shared their reflections with the class and we further discussed the implications of what they identified in their writing.

Student responses and take-aways

Many of the students in our class communicated that they made writing decisions without thinking deeply about cultural norms, assumptions, or power. For example, a student discussed how she wrote about poor quality education in an urban context without reflecting on the systemic/structural racism that stratifies education in particular cities. Another student realized that she made her fictional feature story character a man based on assumptions about gender and occupation (i.e. the character was an aspiring film producer and film production is a male dominated field). While some students struggled to identify their assumptions/cultural expectations, most students found examples in their own writing by the end of class. This activity exposed students to the process of unearthing tacit assumptions within culture and questioning how dominant discourses can influence the ways they think and write. Furthermore, students also had to consider the effects of their writing choices (i.e. using labels and language with negative connotations). Such an acknowledgement is an important step to promote well-rounded and culturally aware practitioners who consider their own positionalities in their future careers.

References

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- Edwards, L. (2012). Exploring the Role of Public Relations as a Cultural Intermediary Occupation. *Cultural Sociology*, 6(4), 438–454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975512445428>
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- Pal, M., & Dutta, M. J. (2008). Public Relations in a Global Context: The Relevance of Critical Modernism as a Theoretical Lens. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20(2), 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627260801894280>