



## Beyond Simple Service Learning: Reengineering the Public Relations Capstone to More Effectively Address a Fast-Changing Industry

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### Abstract:

In many undergraduate public relations programs, a capstone course involves seniors in a traditional service-learning experience, through which small teams of students develop public relations campaigns for a community organization. This case study examines how a program accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications reengineered its year-long public relations service-learning capstone to provide a more dynamic, multi-faceted learning experience beyond the traditional service-learning opportunity. The program infused problem-based learning principles and evidence-based practices into the seniors' year-long capstone service-learning experience to achieve new levels of confidence. Pedagogical strategies, assessment methods, and learning outcomes are explored.

In many undergraduate public relations programs, a capstone course involves seniors in a traditional service-learning experience, through which small teams of students develop public relations campaigns for a community organization. The intent of such a capstone is to help students assimilate their academic learning and internship experiences, and to provide an opportunity to apply knowledge and skills to address a real-world challenge, prior to entering the full-time workforce. Given dramatic changes in industry and society, though, the traditional service-learning capstone may no longer be realizing these outcomes to a sufficient degree.

Indeed, aspiring public relations professionals face challenging economic conditions and a competitive job market. Moreover, new graduates of public relations programs are often hired for social-media expertise, which puts real-time pressure and visibility on their work, especially for those managing online communities on behalf of their organizations or clients. Public relations practice has been defined for some time as a strategic-management function that

requires a person to think and act like a leader (Dozier & Broom, 2006). However, it could be argued that leadership competencies are more important than ever, especially for new professionals entering the field. That is why a re-examination of the traditional service-learning public relations capstone is so vital.

### Changing Economic & Demographic Conditions

The public relations industry is expected to grow at least 20 percent in the decade from 2010 to 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2011). Based on reports from independent agencies, much of that growth will come from the continually expanding role of social media in public relations programs (Worldcom, 2010). Organizations struggle to figure out social-media strategy and find qualified people to effectively manage social media (Gillette, 2010).

Meanwhile, by 2020 the average lifetime of a U.S. corporation is expected to be only 10 years, a nearly 80 percent drop over the course of just a century (Foster & Kaplan, 2000). In order to survive and thrive, organizations of all types will need to continually rein-

vent themselves, adapting to changing conditions. A high demand will be placed on leadership skills such as communication and collaboration, as well as data analysis, critical thinking, and planning for multiple scenarios (Bryan & Farrell, 2009; Courtney, 2001). Bureaucracy and traditional structure will continue to fade from prominence. In this new age of constant, rapid change, all industries will need leaders who can think critically, develop more than one solution, and inspire others (Conley, 2009). In public relations, that will likely require greater cooperation between scholars and practitioners to hone the skills that students will need to thrive in professional practice (Todd, 2009, p. 84).

Further complicating this challenge is the current shift in demographics in the United States. Leadership gaps are developing. Those who belong to Generation X, born from 1965 to 1980, represent only half of the number of people who are Baby Boomers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2001). The oldest members of the Millennial generation, or those born from 1981 to 1999, are just nearing the time when they would traditionally be prepared for leadership roles. In short, the United States will need more young people to step up and lead. Universities must help them become more adequately prepared for these responsibilities. A traditional service-learning capstone may not be enough for those studying public relations.

### **Leadership Development And Traditional Service Learning**

Leadership skills can be fostered in college, through what is known as active or experiential learning, as well as internships and other means. In fact, the process of leadership development generally involves work-related experiences that expand a person's self-awareness and skills in terms of influencing group behavior and achieving team goals (Avolio, 2010; Groves, 2007; McCall, 2010). The traditional public relations capstone provides such active learning experiences, albeit within a controlled classroom setting. To be certain, the traditional public relations service-learning capstone is what Kolb (1984) would define as active or experiential learning. The kind of education exemplified by service-learning is not a new concept in education.

More than 100 years ago, Dewey (1910) espoused that "experience is the best teacher." Decades later, he defined true learning as actively wrestling with real-world problems and conditions, designing

solutions to address these circumstances, and collaborating with others in an attempt to make meaningful progress (Dewey, 1938).

Today, service learning is the form of experiential learning often employed with public relations capstone courses in the United States. By definition, service learning should improve student learning and development while meeting social needs and fostering social change (Butin, 2005). In this context, the traditional public relations service-learning capstone requires students to apply academic learning and internship experience to address the challenges faced by a community organization and develop a public relations campaign.

Still, not all scholars believe that experience is the best teacher. Various studies have shown that experiential learning can reinforce stereotypes, lead students to make sweeping generalizations based on limited data, and, in the end, devise solutions that are far too simple to address complex real-world problems (Conrad & Hedin, 1990; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994; Stanton, 1990; Strand, 1999).

Reflection is what helps students find true meaning in experiential learning, including the kind of service learning traditionally employed in the public relations capstone. Reflection as part of service learning, both individually and in groups, can help foster students' reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving and openness to multiple perspectives and possibilities (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Reflection should be critical, involving description, examination and articulation. Specifically, reflection should be used in service learning to confront bias, contrast theory with practice, identify underlying issues, challenge on-the-surface interpretations, identify alternative perspectives, and provide meaningful documentation (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

A growing interest among scholars concerns the effectiveness of public relations education and pedagogical methods, including service learning in capstone campaign courses; team and peer evaluation usage in capstones; focus areas within curriculum and projects; innovation and stakeholder participation as part of curriculum; and even the role of student-run firms (Austin & Toth, 2011; Lubbers, 2011; Swanson, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Werder & Strand, 2011; Willis & McKie, 2011). At least two studies, in part, have indicated that individual reflection can be a meaningful component of the service-learning model used in a public relations capstone (Matthews, 2011; Wilson, 2012).

But is traditional service learning, even with some reflective aspects, enough to help adequately prepare today's public relations students for such a fast-changing industry? The public relations capstone may benefit from adopting educational concepts used widely in other pre-professional disciplines, such as law, medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, business and nursing. These include problem-based learning and evidence-based practices.

### Problem-Based Learning

The roots of problem-based learning (PBL) reach back to medical education in Canada, nearly 40 years ago (Neufeld & Barrows, 1974). Unlike a traditional case studies approach, PBL involves student-led teams, which is the standard structure for a public relations service-learning capstone. Students are confronted with a problem and work collaboratively toward solving the problem, relying on the professor for guidance but not traditional instruction or specific direction.

However, the traditional public relations service-learning capstone is not always pure PBL. To fulfill the PBL definition, a capstone would need to require students to prioritize their learning goals, conduct their own primary and secondary research, divide responsibilities, assimilate individual knowledge and contributions, negotiate solutions, take stock of feasibility, and repeat the process as often as needed to achieve a meaningful solution (Pennell & Miles, 2009). Moreover, performance assessment should be based on job-related competencies, or at least self-reported confidence, and involve the professional community, not just scholars (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Raghavendra, 2009). Some public relations ser-

vice-learning capstones may integrate some, but not likely all, of these PBL aspects.

### Evidence-Based Practices

While PBL focuses on how to facilitate learning, the evidence-based practices (EBP) model of instruction focuses on what is being learned. There is still an undefined problem at the beginning. However, with EBP, students are intentionally exposed to, or encouraged to actively identify, industry best practices for solving such a problem (Drake *et al.*, 2001; Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004). EBP brings together the student's expertise and the client's challenge, just like a traditional capstone service-learning experience, yet adds a rich layer of learning through the examination of proven best practices. (See Figure 1)

The EBP model, applied to the public relations service-learning capstone, would involve three dimensions. First, the practitioner's individual expertise would reflect students' knowledge and experiences to date. In the capstone, students are acting as practitioners. Next, client values and expectations are a traditional part of the capstone service-learning process. Students learn about the public relations profession by addressing real-world community problems (Hon *et al.*, 2004). Finally, the EBP model would bring best evidence, or proven best practices, into consideration, much like the educational process in medicine or social work (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004).

Scholars believe that EBP is important in pre-professional education (Finn, 2011; Kamhi, 2011). However, there are concerns whether EBP fosters critical thinking—or if a student will still likely be driven by personal opinions and his or her own thinking style, namely open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, reflectiveness, and/or counterfactual thinking (Stanovich, 2009). Students also possess varying cognitive skills, be they interpretive, evaluative, or metacognitive, which means being aware of and analyzing one's own thinking (Fischer & Spiker, 2000). These also likely impact the effectiveness of EBP-based instruction.

### Research Questions

This case study examines the integration of PBL and EBP with traditional service learning, in the context of a public relations capstone experience. Specifically, this study seeks to answer two research questions:

RQ1: Does problem-based learning, within a service-learning course, foster students' confidence in developing a comprehensive public

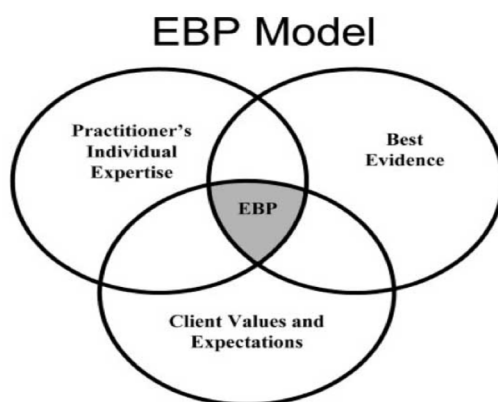


Figure 1. Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) Model (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004, p.138).

relations campaign?

RQ2: Do evidence-based practices, within a service-learning course, enhance students' public relations capstone experience?

### Method

This case study was compiled during the 2012-13 academic year within the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Drake University, located in Des Moines, Iowa. Drake University's program is accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. Its traditional capstone for public relations majors has been in place for more than 25 consecutive years. A total of 29 students (n=29) were enrolled in the public relations service-learning capstone during the period of the case study; all students were seniors, or rising juniors, consisting of 27 females and two males.

### Background

In the year-long service-learning capstone at Drake University, students enroll in JMC 136: Public Relations Research in the fall semester and JMC 146: Public Relations Campaigns in the spring semester. The classes remain distinct from one another in their course outcomes, execution and deliverables while conducting high-quality work for the same community partner for more than eight months. Students are able to enroll in the courses after successfully completing four public relations courses in the curriculum (Public Relations Principles, Public Relations Writing, Public Relations Case Study Analysis, and Public Relations Planning and Management).

Traditionally, the PR Research course covered the full spectrum of qualitative and quantitative research methods during the first half of the fall semester to provide a broad overview of research methods available to public relations professionals. The professors then divided the students into teams that conducted original research for the community partner among a variety of target publics. In a past year, for example, students had worked on behalf of a nonprofit organization committed to decreasing the high school dropout rate statewide. The service-learning capstone students conducted surveys among K-12 teachers, depth interviews with key administrators in statewide school districts, focus groups among concerned parents and depth interviews with select business leaders and top employers in the state. The students gathered valuable data that was presented professionally to the community partners in December, and then used

those findings to inform their campaign development work in the spring semester.

In the spring PR Campaigns course, students were again divided into teams—called agencies in this course—determined by the professors. Students completed a formal application for the course that included a section highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. Anyone interested in serving as an agency account executive submitted an additional resume and cover letter outlining the value they'd bring to the process. Using this information and past performance in PR courses, the professor formed agency teams ranging from 4 to 7 members. Each team was charged with using the findings from the Public Relations Research course to develop a fully realized PR campaign for the community partner. The deliverables include a comprehensive PR plan that outlines objectives, strategies and tactics, completely designed collateral materials that reflect the community partner's brand and key messages, recommendations for implementation (including timeline and budget), and a comprehensive evaluation plan to determine the success of each campaign. Each agency delivered a professional business pitch to the community partner during the final week of classes. After the pitch, the client was presented with each team's work for their review and possible use.

### Reengineering the Capstone

While Drake University's service-learning capstone offered valuable recommendations for the community partners involved, the public relations faculty felt that some key educational opportunities were missing for the students. The professors implemented changes inspired by the problem-based learning model and the evidence-based practices approach, as follows:

### Evidence-based practices

- *Professional adviser:* The faculty felt that students often missed the connection between the valuable work that they do for the service-learning partner and its importance to the community-at-large, as well as its relevance to their fast-approaching professional careers. To more effectively bridge theory and practice, the faculty invited a local public relations professional to act as an adviser to the class for the academic year. The professional adviser provided feedback on the student research and campaign plans while also sharing proven real-world strategies—in other words, evidence-based practices—for presenting their recommendations effectively in both written format

and professional presentation.

- *Guest experts:* Other public relations professionals were invited to class during key points of the year to reinforce evidence-based practices. This included coaching on how to effectively gather, interpret and present data, and how to deliver an effective business pitch.

### *Problem-based learning*

To fulfill the tenets of problem-based learning, as prescribed by Pennell & Miles (2009), the Drake University PR faculty implemented a host of changes, as follows:

- *Complex, real-world problem:* During the case study period, Drake University students worked with the executive directors of three unrelated nonprofit organizations in Des Moines to develop public relations strategies for a metro-wide civility initiative. They also made recommendations for the organizational structure, operating principles, and branding of the initiative itself. Prior clients for the service-learning capstone had traditionally been a single community partner organization with an established structure and established public relations program.
- *Student-conducted research:* The faculty allowed students to identify the target publics for primary research purposes, drawing on their own secondary research.
- *Student-determined learning goals:* Students self-selected their research teams for fall semester, providing an opportunity for each student to focus on specific research methods or to analyze a key public of particular interest.
- *Student-assigned responsibilities:* Each research team established its own goals and timeline. Professors had no involvement in assigning responsibilities or managing progress toward the final presentation due at the end of the semester.
- *Assimilation of individual knowledge and contributions:* Teams compiled all of their research findings into one holistic presentation at the end of the semester, providing a seamless review of data for the community partner while emphasizing the breadth of the research conducted. This reinforced the importance of teamwork.
- *Rich reflection:* The Drake University PR faculty required each student in the Public Relations Research course to write his or her own version of the situation analysis at the end of fall semester. This allowed the professors to not only evaluate

each student's critical thinking ability and comprehension of the current situation, but also to create a robust starting point for group reflection when agency teams were assigned for spring semester and the Public Relations Campaigns course.

- *Feasibility analysis and negotiated solutions:* One of the key concerns of the Drake University PR faculty was the fact that students simply turned over their work at the end of service-learning capstone to the community partner—sometimes leaving campus without a second thought about their recommendations or strategy. To remedy this, the faculty created a feasibility analysis process. Instead of presenting in the final week of the semester, students presented their campaigns three weeks prior to the end of the term.

As always, community partners received the student work after the agencies' professional presentations. However, this time, the community partners were asked to identify key elements from each agency's presentation that they felt were exemplary, interesting, and/or most likely to be implemented.

Using this list, the students came back together as a class to conduct a comprehensive feasibility analysis, determining the implications of implementing each recommendation. While some of these issues might be addressed in the agency campaign books, the analysis forced students to reflect both individually and as a class, thinking critically about their recommendations in a more global context while negotiating final solutions. This feasibility analysis process also provided a reprieve from the often-competitive agency environment, allowing students to once again view their classmates as colleagues and friends—and no longer competitors—before commencement. The students then presented their 'super-campaign' to the community partners, providing the best-of-the-best recommendations, based on feasibility analysis and group consensus.

### *Thinking styles*

At a macro level, the reengineered service-learning capstone intentionally touched on each of the thinking styles identified by Stanovich (2009). The student-identified learning goals and self-selected research teams were intended to foster open-mindedness. The joint presentation of research findings and the 'super-campaign' were to stoke fair-mindedness and reflectiveness. The individual version of the situation analysis, the feasibility analysis and the

'super-campaign' development integrated both reflectiveness and counterfactual thinking.

### **Broader Curriculum**

It should be noted that the Drake University PR faculty implemented many of these capstone service-learning enhancements as a result of a comprehensive PR curriculum review. The faculty examined the content covered in each core course, providing an opportunity to identify key gaps in student learning and possible overlaps in course content. After enhancing all six core PR courses, the faculty submitted the course syllabi and key assignments in each course to four external reviewers currently working as public relations executives for multinational companies. The reviewers provided thoughtful feedback, praising the faculty for incorporating assignments and projects that build the critical thinking necessary to help students understand the global implications of their decisions. In addition, the reviewers stressed the importance of helping students understand internal communications, financial fundamentals, and teamwork and collaboration.

Additionally, some of the basic research methods – such as ethnography and observation, depth interviews, content analysis and communication audits – were being covered in one of the prerequisite courses (JMC 143: Public Relations Planning and Management). Not reviewing these methods in Public Relations Research, as had traditionally been done, freed up valuable time in the Public Relations Research course to more fully understand sampling strategies, master the survey and focus group methods, conduct basic statistical analysis, and devote more time to gathering and interpreting data.

### **Results**

A confidential online survey was administered to the students (n=29) during the spring semester of the service-learning capstone to help determine results for this case study. Twenty-one students participated in the survey, for a response rate of 72 percent.

**RQ1** To answer RQ1, about whether PBL as part of service learning had increased students' confidence in developing a comprehensive public relations campaign, the following survey item was included: "This semester in JMC 146, you worked as part of a self-directed agency team to apply knowledge from prior public relations courses to a real-world challenge. Indicate how confident you would now feel developing a public relations campaign entirely on your own—

that is, without any help from anyone else, including classmates and instructors."

Thirty-three percent of students reported that they are fully confident developing a public relations campaign on their own. The remaining 67 percent said they are somewhat confident. No students reported lacking confidence altogether.

In one student's words:

It's a difficult topic to create a campaign for, but I like the year-long format of capstone. Friends at other schools don't have a PR program that is even close to the caliber of ours. It makes me very grateful for this program and the professors in it.

Another student simply said: "I feel fully prepared for the real world."

Moreover, students were asked to reflect on their overall capstone experience, and indicate how satisfied they were with the overall value. More than 75 percent of students were fully satisfied with the value of the capstone.

Based on the self-reported confidence ratings, the verbatim comments, and the satisfaction scores, it seems that PBL did, indeed, bolster students' confidence.

**RQ2** To answer RQ2, about whether evidence-based practices enhanced students' service-learning capstone experience, the survey included several questions about the professional adviser role and its influence. More than 90 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that the professional adviser was knowledgeable and up-to-date on course-relevant issues, and that the professional adviser provided specific feedback on how to improve their work. Nearly 70 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that the professional adviser helped them develop skills needed by professionals in the field, and that the professional adviser added value to the capstone experience. Typical comments included "Great feedback and resource," "I value the second opinion," and "Great addition!"

Some of the lengthier comments included these verbatim statements from three different students:

I have the opportunity to say that I've had three professionals look over and give insight to my work. I have also had the opportunity to discuss tactics one-on-one with someone who's engaged in public relations practice daily. It is beneficial to have an adviser who is in the field daily. The insight is fresh and helpful.

It's really helpful to get feedback from profes-

sionals—even more of a learning opportunity for us.

Given the strongly affirmative feedback, it seems that an evidence-based practices approach did enhance the capstone experience.

### Discussion

This case study was exploratory—an inside look at the first go-round of reengineering a traditional service-learning capstone. The Drake University PR faculty's over-arching goal was to maximize students' self-confidence and ensure their preparedness for full-time employment in a fast-changing industry. More systematic, structured research will be necessary to fully understand learning outcomes and to evaluate the PBL and EBP principles implemented.

What is known for certain is that the world of public relations will keep changing and evolving. Technology, economics, and demographics assure it. Public relations education will need to keep evolving as well. The traditional service-learning capstone has served students well for quite some time. However, the time may have come for a much more robust, dynamic and challenging approach.

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