Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula
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Abstract
This paper reports on an ongoing enquiry into the value of formally incorporating reflective practice in public relations curricula. It discusses the findings of an action research project that addressed the question: can formally including reflective practice in public relations teaching programmes assist teachers to fulfil the intense curricula demands of credentialism (the pursuit of formal qualifications or skills as an indication of a person’s ability to do a particular job) while adopting a more prosocial approach to the teaching of public relations? The context of this research was an undergraduate, capstone public relations course taught at a New Zealand university. This course provides students with the opportunity to experience authentic elements of the ‘messy swamps’ of professional practice (Schön, 2017) prior to entering the workforce. The paper first discusses the motivations underpinning this research, and why reflection and reflective practice are important for public relations students and practitioners. Next it discusses action research and why it was chosen as the methodology for this research. This part of the paper also explains why Fook and Gardner’s (2007) two-stage reflective method was chosen as the model of formal reflection, and how it was applied. Finally the paper provides specific examples of the complexities and successes that the teaching team faced when formally incorporating reflective practice into the curriculum. The paper concludes with the claim that, despite concerns and difficulties, formal reflection is a ‘sweet spot’ that can provide a way of reconciling the intense curricula demands of credentialism with emerging prosocial approaches to the teaching of public relations.

Keywords:
reflection; reflective practice; public relations education; action research; functionalism
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

Introduction: The motivation behind the research

This paper discusses the value of formally incorporating reflective practice in a third-year capstone public relations paper. It is based on a research project conducted between July and November 2017, with the emphasis on formally including reflective practice in the teaching programme continuing throughout 2018. The discussion in this paper reflects this longer term incorporation of reflective practice into the curriculum.

The ability to engage in critical self-reflection about one’s workplace experiences and professional role has long been recognised as an essential element of high-level workplace knowledge (Boud & Walker, 1998; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Dewey, 1997; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Moon, 1999; Schön, 2017). The strength of learning through reflection is that it captures and values ephemeral, personal ways of knowing such as observations, thoughts, past experiences and judgments, and applies reflective strategies to inform decision-making in a continuous learning cycle throughout one’s professional career. A formal approach to reflection is important because it provides specific strategies for scrutinising past assumptions (Holmström, 2005), challenging routine and habitual ways of behaving, and linking professional knowledge with new knowledge derived from practitioner experience (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Formal reflection assists in resolving the tension experienced by practitioners from many disciplines, between their personal values, and the demands of their organisational and professional environment (Moon, 1999).

On a theoretical level, the field of public relations is experiencing paradigmatic tensions and debates (Edwards, 2012; Fawkes, 2018, L’Etang, 2013; L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006). Rather than being a problem, Edwards (2012) regards this as an indication of the increasing sophistication of the profession. From a teaching perspective these paradigmatic tensions can be seen on a continuum. At one end is the functional approach where the primary role of the teacher is to prepare students to carry out technical activities in order to fulfil the objectives of business. This highly influential approach is reflected in the Capabilities Framework that provides a foundational list of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours (KSABs) recommended by a wide range of industry professionals for entry and mid/senior-level practitioners (Manley & Valin, 2016). Macnamara (2018) cites research that found the most sought after KSABs were functional skills such as writing (92.6 percent) and pitching stories to media (88.9 percent). Another example of the influence of the functional paradigm on curricula can be seen in the Commission on Public Relations Education Report (2017) on undergraduate education. This report, investigating the gaps between public relations curricula and practitioner expectations of entry-level professionals, was underpinned by the idea that the primary responsibility of the teacher is to prepare students to be ‘work ready’ Although the professional bodies associated with developing public relations curricula are increasingly interested in the inclusion of ethical awareness as a desirable graduate attribute, they do not include any explicit reference to formal reflective practice or even informal reflection.
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

At the other end of the paradigmatic continuum, is an increasing acknowledgement of public relations’ prosocial role (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a, 2012b; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2016; Taylor & Yang, 2015). The tensions and debates associated with the role of public relations are occurring at a theoretical level, and are not reflected in curricula which is generally positioned within the functional paradigm. The expectation that public relations courses will be based on a functional approach to the teaching has long concerned many educators because it has led to very negative perceptions of the role of the profession (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; 2012b; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

On a curricula level, the recognition that reflection is an essential element of learning is often signalled in high level documents such as mission statements and graduate profiles. Unfortunately in these documents, the terms ‘reflection’, ‘reflective practice’ and ‘reflective practitioner’ are frequently used as pedagogical buzzwords. For example, the overall graduate profile for the Bachelor of Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology (2018) states that all graduates will develop the knowledge and skills to be a reflective lifelong learner. The graduate profile specifically related to the public relations major (2018) states that graduates will reflect critically on their own learning and professional practice. This inclusion of high level statements related to reflection is convenient because it checks off the social and ethical dimensions of learning and practice (the soft skills) without having to engage in deeper elements of these dimensions. Leitch and Day (2000, p. 8) refer to this as a watering down of the function of reflective practice to the point where it becomes ‘...more a metaphor for representing a process of learning from experience than a term that might be subject to more detailed analysis’. Although the terms ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective practice’ are often referred to in high-level descriptors in practical terms, reflective practice is an undeveloped concept that is rarely formally attended to in the public relations classroom (Fitch, 2011; Mules, 2018).

A well-established link has been established between professionalism and reflection. In many professional fields such as health (Mann, Gordon & MacLeod, 2009; Smith, 2011), social work (Fook & Gardner, 2007), education (Benade, 2015) and, more recently, law (Leering, 2014), reflective practice is recognised as an essential competency domain for claims of professionalism and, as such, is seen as integral to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Public relations practitioners have been preoccupied with achieving the status of a profession for some time (Fitch, 2016; LÆtang, 2013), but this quest has proved elusive (LÆtang, 2013). Although public relations theorists (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005) consider reflection to be an element of the professional legitimation of public relations as it seeks to understand its role in an increasingly complex social and communicative environment, reflection is rarely formally included in public relations curricula (Mules, 2018).

Rather than being neutral deliverers of content who merely reflect the body of knowledge associated with the community of practice of public relations, the researchers in this project (in this case the teaching team) wanted to influence what was perceived as legitimately included or excluded in that body
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

of knowledge, and more broadly the culture of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of public relations practitioners. Many researchers and members of the public perceive public relations as monolithic and utterly toxic (Fawkes, 2018). This negative positioning can be a dilemma for those public relations teachers who are aware of the paradigmatic breadth of public relations, but who are also aware that, on a curriculum level, most students enrol in public relations courses in order to be employed. The teachers in this project wanted to influence the culture of public relations teaching away from the heavy emphasis on achieving specific outputs towards cultivating a more reflective environment that values interpersonal engagement and learning from mistakes, and promoting a learning environment that recognises that the tools of public relations are powerful and should be used responsibly.

The research context

The context of this research is a full-year, undergraduate, capstone public relations course taught at a New Zealand university. The aim of this course is to provide students with the opportunity to experience authentic elements of the messy swamps of professional practice (Schön, 2017) prior to entering the workforce. The students were 65 third-year public relations majors. The course is taught by three teachers working in a team teaching environment, and consists of four assignments. The third assignment is a practicum where groups of five students carry out pro-bono public relations projects for not-for-profit clients, and is worth 30% of the total course marks. Each student group is assigned an experienced industry mentor for the duration of the project.

Prior to this research project the course already included a reflective assignment (Assignment 4). This Assignment is divided into two sections. The first is an individual reflection on the student’s experiences during Assignment 3 (10%). In the second section, each student reflects confidentially on the performance of their fellow team members, including providing specific examples to justify their feedback, with marks being awarded for recognition of how they could have helped team members be more productive (10%). It is important to note that the teaching team had experienced a previous lack of success with this assignment, as was apparent in the rather superficial (and often defensive) student reflections. Hobbs (2007) makes the point that if students are not used to the processes associated with formal reflection, their reflections can often be superficial and guarded. One of the motivations underpinning this project was the teachers’ awareness that they required students to reflect on their experiences, but that formal instruction about how to reflect was covered poorly in the teaching programme.

Applying an action research methodology

The methodology selected for this project was action research. The term action research was first used by Kurt Lewin (1946) to describe a research approach that is particularly suited to bringing about new approaches to challenging learning situations and to generating new, contextualised knowledge based on learning from experience, developing individual theories, and adding to the body of knowledge related to the role and significance of reflective practice in public relations teaching (in this case). Action research is
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

not a methodology that has been widely applied to public relations education or practice, however it was chosen because it is highly suited to researching classroom practice based on a process of guided experimentation that both informs and evaluates teaching actions as the semester progresses (Baskerville & Myers, 2004). From a practical perspective, one of the advantages of an action research methodology is that it is exempt from the usual ethical constraints associated with researching live participants. This is because action research is about the study of the teacher’s own practice rather than the practice of others (Mockler, 2014; Pine, 2009; McNiff, 2009). In an action research approach the researcher is positioned as an insider who is working to improve and understand their own practice, rather than an outsider who is conducting experiments on participants (Pine, 2009). Zeni (2001) provides a very useful rule-of-thumb question as guidance about whether action research is exempt from the requirement to gain ethics approval. She asks whether the research will involve gathering data from normal educational practice, and if it is about changes in curriculum, instruction, pedagogy, and assessment that the teacher would make in their role based on their own professional judgment. If this is the case, then the research is, according to Zeni (2001), exempt from the usual formal ethical processes. Our research met this criterion.

Although ethical approval was not formally required for our research, Zeni (2001) emphasises that ethical principles must always be embedded in action research. In particular she stresses that it is important for researchers to commit to doing no harm and to model ethical behaviour, and that all interpersonal interactions should aim to embody democratic and socially just principles such as striving to be fair and consistent. Another important ethical point is that, unlike the usual consideration of ethics in research, informed consent is not a factor in classroom-based action research because withdrawal is not an option: allowing a student to withdraw would be equivalent to allowing withdrawal from classroom learning. Despite informed consent not being an element of the research, prior to carrying out our research we informed the students of the ethical complexities associated with the project and assured them that their reflections (including those in their individual reflections in Assignment 4) would not be used in the research. The findings that are referred to in this research are based on the teachers’ anecdotal and diarised reflections and observations about the difficulties, efficacy and calibre of the teaching process.

Conducting the research

The reflective approach applied in this research was based on Fook and Gardner’s (2007) two-step method of reflective practice. While models of reflective practice vary, they all involve stages of deconstruction and reconstruction. The first stage involves deconstructing a personal or professional incident in order to understand the underlying assumptions embedded in the experience, and how these assumptions affect perceptions, relationships and practice. The second stage involves using theory to reconstruct the incident to develop awareness of personal values and unacknowledged assumptions, in order to consider what new interpretations might be made, what might be done differently next time, and what specific
strategies might be developed to guide approaches to similar incidents in the future. Central to this process is a state of acceptance and welcoming of doubt, in which students and teachers are consciously prepared to be vulnerable and sensitive to each other, and are prepared to take risks (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Prior to conducting the research, the teaching team spent time developing their knowledge in order to effectively guide group reflection. They discussed the influence of their own personal philosophy of reflection, and shared their concerns regarding professional boundaries. They were mindful that following a set ‘recipe’ may not work because, as Boud and Walker (1998) point out, it is important that the uniqueness of the learners, their prior experience, and the context in which they are operating are taken into account.

Fook and Gardner’s 2007 model of reflective practice was chosen because it is particularly applicable to group reflection and the students were already working on their community projects in groups of five. The teaching team planned four guided group reflections, each 30 minutes long, in weeks five, eight, eleven and twelve. It is important to note that formal reflections were also carried out at other times, particularly when problems arose within the groups and with clients. At the beginning of each reflective session each student was asked to write a 200-word factual account describing an incident that had concerned them, or that they (or their group) wanted to explore further. These incidents could be related to either classroom interaction, group interaction, or interaction with their clients, publics or mentors. They were then asked to write about how they felt about the incident. These individual contributions were placed upside down in the centre of the table. The facilitator randomly selected one of these for discussion. Ideally all five of these incidents would have been covered in the reflective session, but generally this was not possible due to time constraints. The second part of the reflective process involved reassembling the incident. Prior to each session the facilitator prepared a repertoire of possible questions for guided discussion, such as:  {quote}What does this reveal about you as a group member?{quote}  {quote}What are the different possible perspectives about this incident?{quote}  {quote}What would we change if we had a chance to do this over again?{quote} and  {quote}What theory have we learned that could help us look at this a different way?{quote}

**Teachers’ reflections on the pitfalls and successes of the research**

This research addresses the question: can formally including reflective practice in public relations curricula assist teachers to fulfil the intense curricula demands of credentialism while adopting a more prosocial approach to the teaching of public relations? This section reports the teaching team’s feedback based on notes taken in the course of their ongoing informal dialogue and formal discussions at weekly team meetings. A recognised element of classroom-based action research is that this approach does not make claims of empirical legitimacy because classrooms are not ‘sealed containers’ and the variables within the ‘container’ such as changes in timetables and personnel, cannot be controlled (Baumfield, Hall & Wall, 2012).
The three teachers agreed that the incorporation of reflective practice in their teaching was personally and professionally challenging. Although they had spent time preparing prior to commencement of the formal classroom reflections, they reported feeling ill-equipped to cope with the intensity and range of emotions and experiences that the students expressed. One of the teachers said, I didn’t always feel that I had the ability to handle the emotional aspects of the reflective process. In particular they reported that they became so personally engaged in the reflections that taking on the role of detached facilitator was difficult. They were aware that Fook and Gardner (2007) emphasise the importance of the role of the facilitator in selecting words and actions that do not unconsciously demean or dehumanise others, in order to develop an inclusive approach that caters for multiple and diverse perspectives. They found this to be very difficult, and that the required level of sensitivity to the reflective process required extensive practise on the part of the facilitator. The team concluded that they needed to commit to spending more time learning and practising, but they were also aware of the practical difficulties associated with finding the time for regular training and preparation.

Despite the ideal of collaboration in the research process, the teaching team found that there was inevitably a power difference between student and teacher, and that the reflection could never really be a dialogue of equals. The facilitator is supposed to be a neutral participant who guides the students. The teaching team reported that the concept that students are equal participants in the research was problematic. They reported feeling a strong sense of unease at giving up their accustomed degree of control over the interactions and topics that arose during the process of reflection. One teacher reported that she found the ambiguity of her role confusing. She often felt conflicted because, on the one hand she was leading the reflection process, while on the other she was an active participant in the process. Another teacher stated, I definitely needed to give up some of my authority, and yet I needed to be in charge in order to ensure that we stayed on track but I also needed to be prepared to intervene if things got out of hand, and if anybody was upset or offended. They were conscious of the possibility that the reflection might get too personal and directed, or participants might become offended or disturbed.

The teaching team reported a level of intense emotional engagement that they were not accustomed to in their teaching. Unlike the usual forms of research where the researcher aims for emotional detachment in the teaching team, each teacher reported that the reflection exercises required a high level of emotional involvement, and that the experience was highly emotionally charged and often very stressful. One teacher said that throughout the process she was highly conscious of the fragility of human relationships and the risks associated with encouraging people to bring up negative issues which may otherwise have been left unexplored. During the course of the research the teaching team became more attentive to how deceptive appearances can be in a classroom situation. They became aware of undercurrents of interactions, relationships and sensitivities that were not normally visible to them. One teacher reflected that although the students seemed calm, group interactions were often deceptive. Everything appeared
smooth and under control, however during the reflective process students often opened-up about conflict within the team in a way that surprised me.

At times the teaching team questioned the authenticity of the reflections. One of the teachers observed that because the students were so keen to comply they may have felt pressured to participate in an inauthentic way. She doubted her ability to interpret the authenticity of the students' interactions, and suspected that, behind the scenes, social media interactions were impacting on the power dynamics within the group: several students had power and influence within their groups because of the number of followers they had on Instagram or Facebook. The teaching team observed that at the beginning of the formal reflection process, many of the reflections were rather superficial, and the students tended to be apprehensive about putting their thoughts in writing. The team identified three possible reasons for this: that the students were concerned about saying anything negative about others in the team (the students did acknowledge that they felt rather unsafe at first), and being identified; that the students were new to the reflection process and did not understand what it involved; or that the students were so new to the group that they did not have much to reflect on. As the groups became more comfortable with the process they became more positive and less anxious about participating. The students and teachers acknowledged that reflective practice is a learned skill (for both teachers and students), and the skills need to be practised over time. One student group reported that, as they became more comfortable with the reflection process, members found themselves coming to the Monday work-in-progress meetings (WIPs) and reflection sessions prepared with ideas and issues to discuss.

One of the challenges to the formal incorporation of reflective practice into the teaching, and therefore the research methodology, was developing and adhering to a realistic timeframe. A central element of action research and teaching reflective practice is that it is ethically important to engage students in the underpinning philosophy the process (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Prior to the research being conducted (as per Fook and Gardner’s (2007) recommendations), the nature and limitations of reflective practice were discussed with the students—particularly that reflective practice is a learned process, and that while they may find it uncomfortable at first it should become easier and more useful over time.

The teaching team also explained that the process of reflection does not always work: the process suits some better than others, and not all reflections go well (Fook et al., 2015). The length of the semester meant that there were only 12 weeks during which to conduct the research. The original plan was to carry out guided group reflections in weeks five, eight, eleven and twelve. However the team soon realised that this was unrealistic because the demands of the curriculum meant that time was limited. In the end, guided reflections were carried out in weeks five, eight and eleven. One of the teachers commented that the reflection process, if done well, is extremely time-consuming and another said several of our training sessions and formal class reflections became rather ad hoc as other, more pressing, commitments arose. Another teacher said, Even with a high level of commitment from each member of the teaching team, formal reflections seemed to be squeezed...
between assignment tasks, guest speakers and other administrative elements of the course. The teaching team agreed that it was important to be flexible in terms of process.

One member of the teaching team expressed concern that Fook and Gardner’s (2007) approach to reflective practice framed the reflections around problems that had arisen: a deficit approach. She made the point that during the reflective process one group reflected that they felt embarrassed by their own success, and lack of issues and problems. As a result of this feedback the teaching team made a point of encouraging the students to discuss their successes as well as their failures during formal reflections but with an emphasis on why the successes were occurring.

Despite these difficulties, the teaching team agreed that the process of reflection provided specific strategies for thinking deeply about one’s own behaviours, challenging past assumptions, and challenging routine and habitual ways of behaving. The team noted that as the students became more comfortable with reflection, a higher level of commitment and trust developed, and fewer defensive reactions arose. A number of theoretical points about group processes were raised as the students related theory to their own experience. For example, several of the teams concluded that it was important to encourage and support team members. They discussed elements of leadership: for example, they observed that often group members are influential not because of leadership skills, but as a result of having a forceful personality. They concluded that it was individually important to speak up and participate in discussions, and they developed specific norms to allow everyone in the group to contribute meaningfully and strategically, not just the extroverts. They discussed the importance of listening and being more open to the ideas of others, and the influence of culture and gender on team members’ ability and willingness to contribute to the group and ways to manage these differences. One group discussed the importance of being aware of when to move on when an option did not materialise.

Not only were planned formal reflection sessions incorporated into the teaching programme as per the established programme, but the formal process of reflection was used for resolving specific episodes of conflict within teams. When one group experienced intense inter-group discord, the members each anonymously wrote down one concrete example, describing what they perceived had gone wrong during the group interaction. The descriptions were written in neutral and factual terms, and each group member was given the opportunity to discuss their views. For example, when discussing the issue of unequal workload each person discussed the backstory (or context) that led to their perceptions of the situation, and then each discussed one thing they would do differently next time. They commented that they found this to be very helpful because it depersonalised the problem. After formal reflection the group acknowledged that they had contributed to the problem, and should have managed their time better to allow more room for discussion with sponsors and influencers. The important point is that the group arrived at this solution themselves. The teacher observed that the students became very reasonable and considered once they realised that this was an opportunity to express their feelings about the issues that had arisen.
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

The teacher concluded that the formal reflection process was very positive and much more beneficial in the long-term than a more casual, non-reflective discussion would have been.

Discussion

This research has reported on an action research project related to formal teaching of reflective practice in a third-year capstone public relations course. It addressed the question of whether formally including reflective practice in the course enabled teachers to incorporate a more prosocial approach to their teaching while also fulfilling the requirements of credentialism.

Implications for public relations curricula

Despite the fact that interpersonal communication is acknowledged as an important skill in the Capabilities Framework (Manley & Valin, 2016), it is often not formally incorporated into the public relations curriculum. Reflective practice acknowledges the need for students to act professionally on an interpersonal level. The process of formally reflecting provided a way for the teachers to encourage students to pay attention to their relationships with others and achieve a greater awareness of process rather than just focusing on outputs. The teaching team concluded that the formal inclusion of reflection led to subtle insights that enabled the teachers to help the students make better sense of their relationships within group interactions, and within external client and public relationships.

The third-year capstone paper is a tense time for the students. Many of them have internships and are already working. Those who are not working are often concerned about finding employment. Reflection provided an approach or set of tools to call upon when interpersonal difficulties arose, allowing the students to rise above the intensely personal specifics and adopt a more philosophical, dispassionate approach. Without reflection he intense emphasis (even in the minds of the students) on achieving assessable, measurable outputs would have meant that the opportunity to learn from mistakes and reflect on interactive group processes was lost. The teaching team observed that the students became less defensive, with an increased ability to listen more deeply to the opinions of others, to communicate more authentically with peers and teachers, and with an enhanced appreciation of the personal challenges, complexities and oppressions that others may experience.

Implications for the teaching team

Reflecting on the research, the teaching team agreed that the process of leading the students in formal reflection was neither easy nor comfortable. However, they also agreed that teaching reflective practice provided a fresh and exciting way to interact with the students and led to more trusting and critical relationships with each other, thereby extending their own professional development. Incorporation of reflective practice into the curriculum meant the team a much stronger sense of their power in the classroom, and how the implicit frameworks they brought to their practice was highly influential in socialising students (Bernstein, 2004).
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

The teaching team were aware of their dual responsibilities to the professions of both public relations and teaching. This action research project fulfilled these dual requirements by providing a way to develop their own professional knowledge and reflect upon their teaching practice in an ongoing and systematic way. Throughout the project the teaching team remained mindful that the research was an investigation of their teaching practice rather than student responses to reflective practice. They were aware that their role in the reflections was to not only facilitate effectively, but also to gather, analyse and interpret data in order to decide what to change in the reflection process and in their broader pedagogical approach (Zeni, 1998). As reflective practitioners themselves, they could be clearer about what they were doing in their teaching, and why. Zeni (1998) describes reflective practice as a way of offering research-based guidance to those willing to improve. This is a skill set that public relations teachers need to be aware of, develop and take into their practice.

*Implications for the public relations profession*

Reflection can play a role in developing the professional standing of public relations because it provides a way to integrate theory and practice at the beginnings of students' professional careers, and because it provides specific strategies for scrutinising assumptions. However, it has been neglected in public relations education (L’Etang, 2013). Despite the fact that a more prosocial, reflective and critical approach is emerging at a theoretical level, these elements have generally not influenced the practice or (of particular importance to this research) the teaching of public relations, and are therefore considered to be beyond the scope of the public relations curriculum (Edwards, 2014; L’Etang, 2005). One of the concerns expressed by the teaching team was that the tensions and debates that are occurring at a theoretical level in the field of public relations are not reflected in public relations curricula. Reflective practice can provide a route for public relations teachers to resolve the tensions between personal and institutional demands, and prise open the functionalist curriculum that tightly binds their teaching practice. They agreed that formal inclusion of reflective practice in public relations curricula provided a path to fulfil the intense demands of credentialism while at the same time adopting a more prosocial approach to the teaching of public relations.

Public relations teachers aspire to fulfil the demands of their roles as teaching professionals, but the prevailing functionalist approach to the teaching of public relations (the push for credentialism and the requirement to fulfil the business objectives of clients) is generally at odds with the increased awareness of the prosocial role of public relations. The constraints and demands of credentialism mean that teachers are frequently called upon to present public relations as a neutral set of tools. Within this functionalist paradigm is difficult for them to incorporate complex social issues in curricula, and to concurrently develop prosocial consciousness in students. Formal incorporation of reflective practice in the curriculum is a way of prising open the constraints of credentialism without challenging it a sweet spot in navigating the path between transactional and transformational styles of teaching.
Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula

Looking forward

The researchers were aware of the ethical constraints associated with protecting both the anonymity and confidentiality of students. A next step in this research would be to apply for ethical approval to incorporate student feedback so that a more detailed and individual account of the students’ responses to the reflective process could be incorporated into the research.

Conclusion

There is a plurality of views about the field of public relations, but whatever the paradigm, those of us who teach in the field are aware that the tools of public relations (or strategic communications) are powerful and must be used responsibly. This research addressed the question of whether formally including reflective practice in a public relations course was an opportunity for teachers to address this responsibility while also fulfilling the requirements of credentialism. It finds that reflective practice is a ‘sweet spot’ that can contribute to the teacher’s ability to contribute to the development of a cohort of final year students who are well-equipped to challenge their personal assumptions, and who have the motivation and skills to achieve principled and effective relationships with team members, clients and publics. This project may not seem radical to teachers and practitioners in the fields of education, health or social work where reflective practice is well established. But for the community of practice of public relations teachers, taking the time to formally reflect on processes, assumptions and relationships is a radical departure from the usual curricula concerns.

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Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula


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Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula


Reflective practice: A ‘sweet spot’ in public relations curricula


