Towards a generic skills learning model in public relations: student perspectives on self evaluation

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Abstract

Public relations educators and employers have long recognised the importance of technical skills including writing and campaign planning. Although technical and managerial skills are essential to practice and valued by employers, generic skills and capabilities including problem-solving, critical analysis, creative thinking, and self evaluation are equally relevant. Generic skills are valued highly by employers (Clifford, 1999), governments (DEST, 2004), and educators (McWilliam, 2008), and advocated by accrediting professional bodies throughout the world (Anderson, 1999; Hon, Fitzpatrick & Hall, 2004). Support for generic skills comes at a time when educational specialists are also calling for different “sorts” of education and training tailored to a new generation of students (McWilliam, 2008). Within this context of change and curriculum renewal, there is a need to first examine the student perspective on generic skills.

Through the generic skill of self evaluation, this study examines how approximately 200 students self evaluated assignments and interpreted the differences between their self and a marker’s evaluation of performance. The results show strong support for self evaluation techniques to be embedded in a multi layered curricula. The findings of this research are significant to public relations educators, practitioners and professional bodies as they have implications for course design and preparing students for lifelong learning and reflective practice. The findings will be used to develop an integrated learning model to be presented in later papers.
Skills development in public relations education

Research in public relations education has been a popular but fragmented field, focused primarily on identifying and creating programs that respond to the needs of practitioners or educators (Guiniven, 1998; Stacks, Botan & Turk, 1999). An important part of this research is work in skills development with a focus on investigating and developing the public relations skills relevant to graduates and more senior roles (Benigni, Lariscy, & Tinkham, 2002; Turk, 1989). Recent research has drawn attention to the set of public relations and generic skills and capabilities required for successful public relations practitioners at both graduate and managerial levels (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000; Ahles, 2004; Heyman, 2005; Pinkham, 2004).

Building from the long emphasised importance of public relations skills in writing and planning, research in generic skills argues for equal importance in public relations education. Ahles (2004) considers generic skills as being critical to employability and on-the-job success. In a study of members of the Public Relations Society of America, Ahles (2004) found that the characteristics viewed as essential to on-the-job success were a mix of both human relations and public relations professional skills. Human relations skills of trustworthiness, honesty, reliability, and respect were positioned as equal in value to the professional public relations skills in writing, editing, and business writing (Ahles, 2004). In a broader education context, an Australian report commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training identified the following employability skills: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technological skills (DEST, 2004). These skills are developed and refined over a lifetime of learning and practice and often across disciplines and learning environments (DEST, 2004).

While the literature signals the importance and value of both generic and public relations skills, there is little evidence of progress within the public relations education field to leverage the higher education and learning literatures to develop a model for the effective integration of generic skills and capabilities into public relations curricula.

In her introduction to a special education issue of Public Relations Review, Badaracco (2002) commented that “if we are doing our jobs and keeping up with the pace of change, and we are doing something innovative, then the discipline of public relations can contribute to the body of literature on teaching” (p. 136). This study acknowledges Badaracco’s (2002) comment and integrates findings from alternative literatures in education to examine student perceptions and applications of generic skills in public relations learning environments as a first step in a research project that aims to construct an integrative learning model.

Guided by generic skills research found in the public relations and higher education literatures and government reports, this study examines the student perspective of the generic skill of self evaluation. The study examines students
in their first public relations subject as they transition into the university learning environment and the public relations discipline. The paper outlines key elements of the self evaluation research in education, and using this work establishes a framework for introducing and examining self evaluation within a public relations learning environment.

Self evaluation skills and the public relations learning environment

As part of the generic skills of self management, personal development and lifelong learning, self evaluation requires students to be self aware and able to monitor their learning and performance (Cassidy, 2006). Self evaluation enhances student understanding of their personal learning habits (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001) and builds their awareness of learning strategies required in the future (Mok, Lung, Cheng, Cheung & Ng, 2006). Through self evaluation, Klenowski (1995) identified that students build their own understanding of quality performance, an important skill outside the regulated educational experience.

The positive learning outcomes from self evaluation are critical within curricula because they establish the learning processes essential to lifelong learning. At a university level, self evaluation allows students to engage with their learning and monitor their performance (DEST, 2004). Learning experiences and assessment give students the skills set required for the practice of public relations as they have the ability to refine their public relations practice throughout their university studies and into their careers.

Despite being aware of the benefits of self evaluation and reflective learning, students are reluctant to self assess (Evans, McKenna & Oliver, 2005; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 1997; Sullivan & Hall, 1997). This reluctance stems from the pressures of over or under scoring in comparison to assessor evaluations (Orsmond et al., 1997; Sullivan & Hall, 1997) and the difficulties associated with being objective about their own work (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001).

Overcoming this reluctance requires public relations educators to inspire student confidence through structured and supportive learning environments. The education literature argues that educators play a critical role in the preparation of the student for self evaluation. In a study of junior high school students’ use of self assessment, Andrade and Boulay (2003) found that meaningful improvements in student work required the integration of a range of learning strategies that allowed for trial behaviour to be reinforced by positive outcomes. Klenowski (1995) specifically identified three basic standards for self evaluation activities: criteria for self evaluation, the opportunity for dialogue, and a process for grade determination.
Learning framework to support self evaluation in public relations

One of the challenges for this study was the construction of an appropriate framework for the investigation of the generic skill of self evaluation within an introductory public relations subject. The framework followed the detailed advice of Klenowski (1995) and integrated Andrade and Boulay’s (2003) work around trial behaviours as a way of building student confidence and familiarity with the self evaluation task.

Following Kelnowski’s (1995) requirements, the teaching team developed assessment and assessment criteria. Assessment criteria were created following criterion-referenced assessment and in line with unit learning objectives and learning and teaching approaches (Carlson et al., 2000). The criteria for the unit were: problem identification, research and decision-making; application and evaluation; and communication and interpersonal skills. Each criterion was weighted equally and graded on a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 representing the lowest grade and 7 representing the highest grade. A grade of 4 represents a pass.

The constructive alignment among learning objectives, assessment criteria and teaching and learning activities (Carlson et al., 2000) offered the opportunity for dialogue between students and teachers. Although joint definition of assessment criteria is advocated for its ability to assist student understanding (Abbiss & Hay, 1992; Hay, 1995), unit enrolments of 290 students and resources prohibited this approach.

Alternative learning support strategies were embedded into the subject to enhance student understanding of criteria including dialogue, the use of exemplars, and peer evaluation. Dialogue was reinforced using dedicated class discussions, an online assessment package and exemplars. This strategy ensured the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge through shared understanding of expectations (Nonaka, 1991). Following the advice of Andrade and Boulay (2003), the teaching team incorporated trial behaviour by transitioning students from peer to self assessment as a learning strategy. Students first built familiarity with assessment criteria by grading an exemplar or sample paper. Exemplars offer students practical experiences in critique which builds student skills in evaluation that can be transferred to the practice of self evaluation (Stefani, 1998; Klenowski, 1995). Student judgements of the exemplar were discussed in class and compared to their teacher’s grading of the exemplar. Students and their teacher discussed the similarities and differences that appeared allowing for extended dialogue.

Within this multi-layered and supportive framework, the teaching team emphasised the importance and usefulness of self evaluation for students new to both university and public relations. Students were asked to self evaluate their work and submit their overall grade using the same system as their teachers or markers.
Towards a generic skills learning model in public relations

Methodology

This study is a first step in a research program that aims to both examine student perspectives on generic skills and create a model for the integration of generic skills into public relations curricula. As a first step, this study follows Klenowski's (1995) framework to measure student perspectives on self-evaluation and student grade determinations within an introductory public relations unit with a student enrolment of 290. The subject included full and part-time public relations students as well as students from other disciplines who were taking the subject as an elective. In line with the university's profile, the students were both domestic and international and represented both school leavers and mature age students returning to university after a period of absence from formal education. All students studied on campus.

Two instruments were created to measure these outcomes. The first research instrument related to the assessment criteria. Students were asked to self-evaluate their assignments prior to submission. Students assessed their work against each criterion and assigned themselves an overall grade from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). These self-evaluations were submitted with their assignments. Assessors graded each assignment using the assessment rubric and this was returned to the students. Student and assessor gradings were then compared. Finally, as well as student and assessor overall grades, the actual statistical mean of the criterion ratings was calculated as a comparison.

The second research instrument was a questionnaire that was administered to all students enrolled in the unit. This questionnaire aimed to understand the student experience of self-evaluation and assessment. The self-evaluation questions asked students about how they evaluated their strengths and weaknesses and how they interpreted differences between their self and their assessor's judgements of performance. Five-point Likert scales were used to allow the students to demonstrate their strength of agreement or disagreement with particular statements. The questionnaire also captured key demographic information. The questionnaire was administered in a lecture session towards the end of the semester. All students enrolled in the subject were eligible to complete the questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous and optional in line with the university's ethics approval for research on current students.

The questionnaires were completed and the data analysed using SPSS. Frequency counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for relevant variables with chi-square analyses and t-tests conducted where appropriate.
Self evaluation results

Of the 290 students enrolled in the unit, 187 provided self evaluations or scores of their first assignment and 110 students of their second assignment. The mean grades for both assignments’ student and marker evaluations are presented on a scale of 1 to 7 with 7 being the highest grade (see Table 1).

Table 1: Self evaluation scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean grade (scale of 1–7)</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self evaluation (assignment one)</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self evaluation (assignment two)</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In comparison to student self evaluation scores, markers’ scores were marginally lower (see Table 2). Statistical tests showed significant differences between marker evaluations and student self evaluations for both assignment one \( (t(186) = 6.188, p < .0001) \) and assignment two \( (t(109) = 2.275, p = .025) \). There is closer alignment between self and marker evaluations in the second assessment item.

Table 2: Marker evaluation scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean grade (scale of 1–7)</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marker evaluation (assignment one)</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marker evaluation (assignment two)</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences between self and marker evaluation

For the first assignment, students who received grades from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and four being a pass, self evaluated their performance at levels higher than what they achieved (see Table 3). That is, more than 60 percent of the respondents assessed their performance in the first assessment item at a higher grade than they actually achieved. On average, these students over-estimated their performance and believed they would receive a grade that was between one to two levels above their actual performance. Conversely, students who received grades of 6 and 7, with seven being the highest possible grade, self evaluated their performance at least one grade level lower than that which they achieved. That is, higher performing students, almost 40 percent of the sample, under-estimated their performance.
Table 3: Comparison of marker and student self evaluation in assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty overall grade for assignment one</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Mean students’ calculated overall grade for assignment one</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same pattern is evident for the second assessment item (Table 4). Students who received grades up to and including a 5 thought they would do better than they did. Again, students who received 3 and 4 grades estimated that they were going to get grades that averaged to a 5. Students who received the higher grades (6, 7) thought they would do slightly worse than they did.

Table 4: Comparison of marker and student self evaluation in assignment two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty overall grade for assignment two</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Mean students’ calculated overall grade for assignment one</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey results

Usefulness of preparation exercise

Of the 290 students, 194 questionnaires were returned. Survey results showed that students found support for the exemplar (see Table 2). Of the 194 students, 126 (64.9%) found the exemplar useful.
Level of self evaluation and interpretation of marker evaluation

Student reflections on their performance showed that they were able to engage with their own learning practices by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. More than 70 percent of students said they could both identify their strengths and weaknesses in performance (see Table 5).

Although the majority of students agreed that self assessment activities helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses, only 53.6 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that self evaluation helped them understand where their personal performance interpretation differed from their teacher or marker’s evaluation (see Table 5). In relation to this question, the majority of students provided a neutral response.

Table 5: Student reflections on performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplar useful in planning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can identify strengths</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can identify weaknesses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self evaluation helped me understand where my interpretation was different to the marker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Integration of peer evaluation

The results of this study show that self evaluation helps students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their assessment items with good understanding about how to interpret differences between their self evaluation and marker evaluations. As a result, these findings suggest that the learning activities designed in this unit serve as a foundation for future development in students’ academic studies and professional careers. In relation to the self evaluation activity, students were clearly able to use this process to identify their strengths and weaknesses.
Towards a generic skills learning model in public relations

Despite the positive outcomes for self evaluation, the survey also suggests misalignment between the self evaluation activity and student understanding of differences between their personal evaluation and the marker's judgement. Although the qualitative feedback provided by the marker as notations within each assignment would have helped explain marker judgements, the authors hoped for a higher level of understanding from the students.

Data from the self evaluation activity sheds some light on the survey findings. The self evaluation data showed that when grading their work, the student cohort judged their overall performance as higher than their markers' evaluation in both assessment items but with a smaller gap between assessment item two than assessment item one. This may indicate that as students became more familiar and confident with the process of examining their own work, they were able to more accurately evaluate their performance.

Learning tasks and activities around self evaluation follow a similar process to learning activities around skills in public relations writing. Both writing and self evaluation activities may be new or unfamiliar to students and hence require a structured approach that allows students to practise and refine their skills in these areas. As a result, it is important for educators to consider self evaluation as a skill that requires resources and learning activities equivalent to those involved in building skills in public relations writing or planning. That is, it is important to teach students how to self evaluate and not merely emphasise the usefulness of self evaluation.

While the cohort level of analysis shows over-scoring in both assessment items, further examination at the grade level provides more insight. Poor to average students over-inflated their self evaluation scores whereas high performing students under-scored their self evaluation scores. This over- and under-scoring can be a result of issues with objectivity, self efficacy, and perceived reaction of the assessor. According to Hanrahan and Isaacs (2001), students find it difficult to be objective about their own work. It is likely that students whose work scored below a pass would have spent more time with their teachers and these interactions may in fact be what students have used to self evaluate their performance. Further, the intangible nature of self evaluation skills building exercises may also have a role to play. While learning activities involving public relations writing result in written pieces such as media releases or brochures, self evaluation tasks are not easily made tangible. Future studies should consider these issues and integrate learning and teaching strategies to build student confidence and awareness. More consideration of this is given in the next section of this paper.

Implications for model development

The study shows good support for the generic skill of self evaluation as well as the embedded and integrated learning model for the self evaluation task in the introductory public relations unit. In particular, students positively supported
the learning structures advocated by Klenowski (1995) and Andrade and Boulay (2003). Specifically, the students found the exemplar useful in planning their assignments (Andrade & Boulay, 2003) and used the marking criteria and grade determination process to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and interpret performance (Klenowski, 1995).

One area specific to self evaluation that requires further consideration from a learning and teaching perspective is the difference between student and marker judgements. Unless acknowledged and clearly explained or managed, differences between student and marker judgements have the potential to impact strongly on students' future learning. The assumption that the marker is always correct is false (Orsmond et al., 1997). One way to overcome these differences is to incorporate student or peer performance judgements into the student's final grade. Further work in this area could follow the work of Stefani (1998) who integrated student self assessment scores into final grades.

While the generic skill of self evaluation presents its own challenges in an introductory unit, this study represents only one part of a broader learning model that aims to integrate a range of generic skills across public relations programs. A broader model should consider the value of self evaluation in writing and planning units, a range of generic skills, and the importance of skills development across public relations programs. The role of peer assessment in relation to self evaluation should also be emphasised in relation to its ability to provide the opportunity to review, reflect, and refine work.

Although this study was set in an introductory subject, self evaluation is equally important in other public relations subjects including writing and planning. Public relations writing and planning are essential to new graduates and public relations managers. Embedding a similar learning framework around self evaluation into writing or planning subjects is encouraged to give students the opportunity to refine their work and transfer the practice of self evaluation from a university setting to a workplace.

At a macro level, a learning model should integrate not only self evaluation but a range of generic skills into the public relations curricula. Deciding on these skills will be a challenge. The Australian Council of Educational Research puts forward one set of skills important in university learning environments: communication, problem solving, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, ethics, and technology (Trapper, 2000). This list is somewhat complementary to other lists provided by government including the DEST (2004) report.

A public relations learning model should consider the range of generic skills appropriate to their university’s programs and learning environments as well as industry standards. Further research should investigate the mix of skills required of public relations graduates, new practitioners, and more senior practitioners across a range of public relations contexts. It is likely that a community consultation role requires skills that are different to a publicity role. Such diversity is important to not only the profession but the design of public
relations courses. Even though industry and the academy may move to identify the skills set of an ideal graduate or practitioner, such models should make room for diversity and uniqueness.

Once the generic skills have been identified, it is important for learning models to build and refine skills across courses. Ideally, final year students should transition out with generic skills proficiency, having been given the opportunity to both identify and enhance skills in areas requiring improvement throughout their course. Although a learning model for integrating generic skills will require a resource investment, it is likely that many public relations courses or programs already consider generic and public relations skills.

Now is the time for public relations educators to have conversations with each other, our students, industry partners, and experts outside of our disciplines about generic and public relations skills. A collaborative approach is essential for our discipline’s education research to extend beyond a debate about skills to examine and create learning models and frameworks that integrate generic skills.

References


