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Teaching International Public Relations: An Interactive Approach

ABSTRACT

Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, Brazil, have joined public relations campaigns classes to teach students the lessons that need to be learned in international public relations performance. Class assignments include research to build knowledge of culture, government, and the media within each others countries. Student campaign teams must use each other as counselors in learning about differences in culture and public relations performance needs. They must also conduct research instructing and using each other in carrying out research activities in the same working relationship that they must eventually use as professionals in carrying out campaigns in each other's countries.

RESUMO

A Ball State University, Communication College, Muncie, Indiana, USA e a Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, FAMECOS, Porto Alegre, Brasil têm realizado, em conjunto, aulas de campanhas de Relações Públicas dirigidas a estudantes das duas universidades, com o objetivo de qualificar a prática de Relações Públicas Internacionais. Os conteúdos das aulas incluem pesquisas para conhecimento da cultura, das políticas governamentais e da mídia de cada país. As equipes de estudantes assessoram-se mutuamente, no que tange ao aprendizado sobre as diferenças culturais e ao desempenho de Relações Públicas, desenvolvendo atividades de pesquisa, simulando o trabalho, em nível profissional, no que se refere à execução das campanhas em cada país.

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Introduction

Public relations educators have an increasing awareness of the need to prepare public relations graduates with knowledge and skills that will prepare them with an understanding of the needs and challenges of international public relations performance. The task, however, is somewhat daunting due to the diversity of global cultures, languages, government systems, economic systems, and differences in how public relations is viewed and performed. Quite simply, in view of the global knowledge needs, where should the priorities be placed in preparing students for roles in international public relations?

The common admonition of international public relations practitioners is to “think globally and “act locally.” But translating this admonition into a meaningful classroom experience is a challenge.

It is generally assumed that the pedagogical need is to teach history and culture, the ability to communicate effectively with those for whom English may be a second language, the knowledge of media within a country or region, and variations in government effecting public relations performance within countries. While some of this content can be taught through research assignments and with the classroom visitation of practitioners who practice international public relations and by encouraging students to take elective courses on the history and culture of countries in which they think they would like to perform public relations, neither student nor educator can accurately predict the specific knowledge needs of graduates entering the field of internatio-

nal public relations today.

Students may learn German, Japanese, or Russian only to later learn that knowledge of Spanish and of Hispanic cultures would have better prepared them for their corporate or counseling firm responsibilities. Bali State graduate John Pekarek, former public relations manager for Ford Motor Corporation for the Asia Pacific region, only later to be named international public relations manager for Europe provides an example of assignment changes by corporations in international public relations management. The educational need, therefore, is not the teaching of language, cultures, and knowledge of political and economic systems, but instead an understanding of how to work with and through public relations practitioners in other countries and with international clients and audiences. The need is to build understanding of the communication and cultural barriers all practitioners face when working with practitioners and clients in other cultures and to teach respect for the counsel of their international peers.

In order to create this recognition on the part of students, the authors developed a concept for an international teaching model in the spring of 2002 and pilot tested the model during the following summer term.

This paper explains the concept for an interactive learning process that places students in a campaigns classes in Brazil and in the United States into a classroom setting where students in both countries learn how to depend on each other in gathering research, in adapting planning based on cultural need, in refining strategies, tactics and creativity for international target audiences, and in communicating with clients in each other's countries. The concept also creates awareness of the barriers that will be encountered in communication with international colleagues when differences in performance and language frequently create differences in understanding of the

meaning of public relations terminology.

Review of Literature

International public relations textbooks and public relations textbook content on international public relations remains limited. Culbertson and Chin's pioneer book introduced in 1996 entitled *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis*, remains one of the few books available for international public relations courses (1) although Tilson and Alonzie are editing a new text that will enter the market in 2003 (2). Krishnamurthy Sriramesh in India, formerly at the University of Florida, also has a new international text planned for publication in the same year.

In 1990 Moss edited one of the first international public relations case study texts (3) and a revision in 2001 with DeSanto as co-editor also provides international case studies appropriate for a class designed to teach students about international public relations performance (4).

Although major textbooks used in entry level courses in the United States classrooms remain limited in their international public relations performance content as noted by Ogbondah and Pratt (5), Wilcox, Ault and Agee introduced a chapter on international public relations as early as 1992 with what remains the most extensive discussion of international public relations in a major principles of public relations course textbook (6). Newsom, Turk, and Ruckeberg in *This is PR* (2000) now includes content relating to the global environment for practicing public relations (7). Both textbooks, however, have not been designed for international public relations classroom use, but instead are texts used primarily for entry-level public relations courses.

Other materials have been available for use by the teacher of international public relations, but these have not been available as textbooks. Denig and van der Meiden produced *A Geography of Public Relati-*

ons Trends as early as 1985 resulting from what had been identified as the 2¹⁰ World Congress on Public Relations Education held in conjunction with the 10th Public relations World Congress in Amsterdam, Netherlands (8). The book, however, has been available in libraries along with the International Public Relations Association's Gold Paper No. 13 edited by Denig and Weisink (9). Journals have also contributed to the source material for teaching an international public relations course. *International Public Relations Review* a rich source of evolving global public relations performance advancement and change until it was discontinued (10) and *Public Relations Review* devoted an issue to International Public Relations in 1992 (11).

More recently, the *Journal of communication Management* has been a source of research content related to global change (12). A number of professionals have examined the development of international public relations and its educational and performance needs. Carr in 1989 was pointing out that public relations practitioners interested in international performance must first learn the differences in cultural disparities and shared his knowledge in working with the Japanese media (13).

In 1990, Farinelli noted the provincialism of United States public relations practitioners and called for the study of the international scene (14). In 1991, Graham suggested that the issues creating international public relations opportunities were the environmental movement, the globalization of business, and the changes in corporate culture in response to global competition (15). Burk in 1994 noted that corporations may have international objectives that should be reached, but the means used to attain the goal may differ from country to country. Cross-cultural training is an effective tool for public relations practitioners in obtaining skills and knowledge when interacting with a foreign client (16).

McDermott looked at the development of international public relations cour-

ses offered in 1991 finding that only four American universities listed international public relations courses in 1988-89 but by 1991, the number had grown to 15 and that a number of universities were planning courses for their curriculum (17).

Educators have also looked at educational needs. Sommerness found in 1994 that out of 119 institutions offering programs in public relations, only one university offered an international public relations course at the undergraduate level (18). Krukberg in 1987, in a study of transnational corporations, found that variations in ethical standards resulted in major differences in performance (19). Botan identified a matrix in 1992 that suggested four factors influence international public relations practice: the level of national development, the type of primary clients, the level of legal protection along with the political role of public relations practice, and the uniqueness of the history of the practice (20). In the same year, Sharpe stated that social and cultural conditioning have shaped and are shaping the evolution of public relations and its performance in different countries. He cited the influence of democracy, a free press, and the advancement of communication technology as influencing the advancement of public relations in different countries (21). Neff in 1993 stressed that international public relations practitioners must make sure that they understand each local market including the customs, culture and language. She pointed out that knowledge of foreign language; skills in multicultural negotiation, and knowledge of diversity in the workplace will add depth to an individual's knowledge of international public relations (22).

Grunig was also pointing out in 1996 that an organization with a symmetrical worldview typically has an open systems presupposition in their cultures. He described such an organization as open to interpenetrating systems and freely exchanging information with those systems (23). Grunig's studies and those of many inter-

national students have continued to examine public relations performance based on an examination of his theory while others such as Ihator (24), Heibert (25), and Sharpe (26) continue to examine factors that are forcing symmetrical performance on global public relations practice.

Educational Methodology International Course Concept

While most universities are viewing the teaching of international public relations as a special course where cultural and media differences are examined, Ball State has viewed the teaching process as an integration of the international experience and knowledge base into an existing public relations course - the public relations campaign course, the capstone course for undergraduates. Following a successful pilot trial, plans are now in place to provide the international public relations campaigns experience for students twice each year - during Ball State's Fall term which is the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul's Spring term, and during Bali State's Summer term which falls during the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul's Winter term.

The concept was developed in the spring of 2002 by author Dr. Melvin L. Sharpe in consultation with co-author Dr. Roberto Simões of the Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul. Graduate students began the planning of a course website that could be read in both English and Portuguese in the Spring term of 2002. The Website was planned with a homepage that would allow the student to access information about the culture, government, and media in Brazil and the United States and in the cities and states of Muncie, Indiana, and of Porto Alegre in the State of Rio Grande do Sul in Southern Brazil. The Website provides current information on clients selected for the classes in each of these terms, provides links to information within

both countries, and will eventually facilitate the email communication of class members and provide chat room ability for the members of the two classes. Class members will be responsible for updating the website each term with new and additional information relating to client needs and with new websites providing research information of value to students in both countries. The class website can be accessed through the website for the Bali State University Department of Journalism at www.bsu.edu/journalism/.

The campaigns concept involves the identification of a nonprofit organization in need of public relations support existing in both the cities of Porto Alegre, Brazil, and Muncie, Indiana. In terms in which the international performance experience is taught, a Brazilian student team will be given the assignment of planning a campaign for Muncie, Indiana, while the United States student team will plan the campaign for Porto Alegre. Plans are to also have students in both countries working together on single campaigns where collaborative planning and implementation is needed. The concept is intentionally designed to force dependence of the two teams on each other in their planning and research activities. Client cooperation is also sought in contributing to student understanding of client needs.

One of the factors in the selection of the Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul for this international pilot class is an existing relationship between the State of Indiana and the Brazilian State of Rio Grande do Sul as partners in the Partners of Americas program sponsored by the United States Department of State. The State of Rio Grande do Sul and the State of Indiana have a long history of cultural exchange and economic cooperation through this program. Geographically, Rio Grande do Sul is the southern most state in Brazil bordering Argentina and Uruguay, which results in a temperature climate with seasonal changes resulting in many agricultural

similarities between this area of Brazil and Indiana. In addition, the State of Rio Grande do Sul was an area settled by European immigrants from Germany and Italy which results in some shared cultural heritage with a Midwestern state which was also settled with some of the same cultural immigration occurring in both North and South America during the industrial revolution.

Course Objectives

In developing a new concept for teaching an international public relations course, the following educational objectives were identified:

1. To provide students with interaction that will build their understanding of the importance of consultation with professionals within the country where public relations programs and planning are to be applied.
2. To teach students the types of language misunderstandings that can be encountered due to cultural differences when working with professionals in other countries.
3. To enable students to learn the research needs they will have in targeting international audiences and how to address these needs working through professionals in another country to carry out the research needed for a successful international campaign.
4. To develop meaningful library and Internet research assignments that will expand student knowledge of the cultures, government, media, and of public relations performance for the country for which a public relations plan is being prepared.
5. To expand student understanding of their needs in making presentations to international management teams and in maintaining communication when physical communication is not possible.
6. To allow students the benefit of guidance from not only their own instructor, but also from an international counterpart so that they may benefit from the international team teaching approach.
7. To provide students experience in using

existing and new technology to communicate with international professionals and clients.

8. To create student awareness of the fact that cultures vary widely within other countries just as they do in their own so that they understand that they will have continuing knowledge needs in international public relations even though some specialization by country can be achieved.

Course Methodology:

Several methods of communication are being used to facilitate communication among students, faculty, and clients. Initially, communication was achieved using conference call equipment and by email. An interactive course website has now been developed that will provide a chat room for student interaction. Class email address lists will also be developed allowing easy direct communication among students and with instructors in both the United States and Brazil. Visual communication was achieved in June of 2002 using a Polycom Viewstation FX. This technology involves the use of a H. 323 Standard Internet capable video conferencing unit. Units are placed in a conference room in Brazil at the Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and in a conference room at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. The units provide a camera on top of a computer placed at the end of a conference table. The camera, which has a wide-angle lens, is designed to allow the campaigns class at both universities to see each other on the computer screen beneath the camera as students and instructors in the classes talk to each other. (In the initial stages, Brazil used a Distance Learning studio at its end until the loan of a Polycom Viewstation could be arranged.) When difficulties in transmission occurred prior to placement of the Polycom Viewstation in Brazil, students were able to fall back on the use of telephone conferencing call equipment. But, for the most part, transmission has been instantaneous with top quality visual communication that allows students and faculty to talk face-to-face via the Inter-

net at no telephone line transmission cost. class of graduate students was initially involved at Ball State in developing the web site for the course and in identifying web sites that can be used by undergraduate students for research about each other's countries, states, and cities. The graduate students also interviewed the first clients in both countries collecting facts and information to be used by future classes in defining the problem and mission to be accomplished for the clients. This information was then incorporated into the website. During the first two trial classes, the model has involved team assignments to client projects in each other's countries forcing a dependence on each other in research and planning. Future classes, however, may also involve work on a single client account where the account team will be international in structure. Both approaches can then be compared and evaluated for the learning experience provided.

Problems that had to be Overcome

Because the seasons are reversed in the Southern Hemisphere, academic terms do not match perfectly. Brazil's fall term begins in the middle of March while Ball State's spring term begins the second week of January during the Brazilian summer months and academic vacation period. In addition, time zone differences had to be considered in scheduling the class meeting time to allow international class interaction. The City of Porto Alegre is two or three time zones east of the State of Indiana depending on the time of year and daylight saving time periods in both countries.

Fortunately, both universities are able to plan night classes for campaigns courses or Ball State is able to schedule afternoon class sessions that fit Brazilian evening class scheduling needs. However, this must be coordinated so that classes are blocked for the same days during the week. Ball State evening classes meet from 6:30

p.m. to 9:15 p.m., which provides the opportunity for use of some class time for campaign team communication each week. Other account team communication sessions must be arranged based on the needs of class members each term in which the class is taught.

Class size must be controlled. Ball State campaigns classes are normally broken into four or five person account teams. Class size is limited to 20 to 25 students to allow close faculty supervision of student activities in working with clients. Brazilian classes can be much larger and all student members of the class can be involved in working on a single account, creating difficulties in the communication process where interaction must occur between all participants. A larger group also is subject to the limitations of a camera picking up the visual images of participants sitting around a single conference table. The camera does have remote voice activated capability in following a speaker and a zoom lens. But some training and experience is needed in its operation. The campaigns class in the Ball State public relations undergraduate degree program is viewed as the capstone course. This means that students have completed undergraduate journalistic writing courses, a public relations writing course, a basic graphic design course, a public relations computer publication design course, a principles of public relations course, a public relations writing course, and a strategic planning course before being allowed to enroll in the campaigns class. Curriculum requirements differ in Brazil, which limits the skills and theory knowledge of Brazilian students in accomplishing client needs. In addition to cultural differences and differences in the understanding and application of public relations terminology, students must learn the differences in public relations performance. In Brazil, licensed journalists handle media relations within organizations whereas licensed public relations professionals handle promotion and special event planning. In the United States,

public relations professionals handle the full range of communication responsibilities from lobbying, media relations, fundraising, institutional advertising, special event planning, and community, investor, and employee relations.

Students in both countries have difficulty understanding the impact of these professional variations on strategic thinking and planning simply because of differences in cultural orientation. Brazilian students have had to learn the limitations of communicating messages in a smaller American city with only a public television station and a single newspaper. They must also learn that radio stations in the United States carry virtually no news today whereas in Brazil, the radio station is an important news source in reaching rural audiences with low literacy. There are also limitations in access to library resources in providing up-to-date information about each other's countries and in Brazil to public relations books. Language becomes a barrier for students in the United States in acquiring web site information that is primarily in Portuguese. These limitations are factors in the type of research papers that may be assigned students to cause them to learn about culture, government, and the media for the area needed for campaign planning. The solution, however, has been greater dependence of one student group on the other in learning from each other and in requesting research help from each other that requires class members to learn more about their own countries so that they can communicate needed knowledge to their international counterpart. Interaction with clients has been somewhat limited because of course timing. Therefore, most of the communication needs with clients have been fulfilled by students outside of the class meeting time period. It is hoped that email access can be achieved with future clients that will improve client/student team communication further expanding the learning experience.

Campaign team presentations should also improve with the placement of a Po-

lycom camera in Brazil. The limitation has been the need for translation of both the written and oral presentation, which increases the time needed for accomplishment of both and a time consuming responsibility on the part of students. The problems, however, are also recognized as an important part of the learning experience since the uncertainty of the accuracy of the translation is a real problem encountered by international professionals in preparing presentations and public relations tools.

Evaluation

Three members of the faculty and dean and the student account team leader from the Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul were guests of Bali State University's College of Communication, Information and Media during the week of June 16, 2002. During the four-day visitation, it was agreed that the Bali State and Catholic University terms meshed best during the fall and summer semester terms. Therefore, future scheduling of the international course will be planned during these terms. It was also agreed that a Ball State class scheduled from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. or from 3 to 5 p.m. worked best for the evening class structure in Brazil. Scheduling for the days of the week on which the course will be taught will be prearranged prior to each term. It was agreed that students would only need the class interaction one day of the week, leaving other class periods for the achievement of planning and work to be presented in the visual communication class periods. Other communication will be carried out through direct student Internet contact and through use of a chat room on the web site once it is added. It is expected that this will be done through "Blackboard" at Bali State and that a password or number can be given to class participants for the term in which the course is taught.

It was also agreed that a schedule for the 15 weeks of a regular semester term

would be developed so that instructors in both countries will have a format to follow in guiding students in progressing through the strategic planning process and in completing out-of-class research paper assignments and in preparing account teams for visual and oral communication interaction. Client class visitation would also be scheduled in advance this way for both the initial meeting with students to answer questions and at the conclusion of the course for campaign presentations. The number of students to be involved in working on international client assignments will also be controlled in both Brazil and the United States to assure a sound learning experience for all participants and to allow adequate faculty oversight of student activities.

Student evaluation revealed that students in the classes took special pride in being a part of a class that allowed the international dialogue and interaction. In particular, they learned how to work with those in another culture and the needs and requirements of working on campaigns where meeting deadlines required the cooperation and help of international peers.

Educators in both countries found educational value that they had not expected. Students quickly learned how to correct communication errors using follow-up and additional questions to learn how they were perceived. Areas of common experience were explored as a way of improving intercultural communication. The international Gold Cup soccer competition, for example, became a focus for several weeks in informal communication between the student groups. For most of the students in Muncie, an interest in world soccer was entirely new.

Both groups learned more quickly than they would have by only reading about each other's cultures. Class member interest in learning about each other increased due to their personal involvement and interaction. In particular, interest in learning more about each other's language, studies and culture increased as the course

progressed and students became more comfortable in their face-to-face interaction. Students also learned that they did not know everything they needed to know about their own cultures in order to respond adequately to questions about their culture from their international counterparts. This created new and unexpected research needs on the part of student teams.

Evaluation will continue as the course moves into the first full semester where the website and interactive visual communication will be available to class participants in both countries during from the beginning of the course.

Summary and Conclusions

International public relations is a difficult course to design for public relations students because of the broad interest of students in different parts of the world and the complexity of understanding language and culture within even a single country or region of the world let alone multiple countries. In addition, public relations firms and corporations have international public relations needs that are truly global in scope which make it difficult to identify specialization needs, particularly at the undergraduate university level. An example of the difficulty of defining needs is demonstrated by international public relations managers who may have responsibilities in one part of the world only to be reassigned to another. Corporations, therefore, evaluate ability not by specialization but by the ability to work cross culturally.

The international training need, therefore, appears to the development of the cross cultural ability to understand the kinds of problems that will be encountered in communication and in working with diverse cultures. A student's understanding of international research needs and the degree to which he or she must remain open to the learning process may be among the most important lessons to teach.

The Ball State model is teaching future practitioners to work with their international counterparts in conducting research and planning so that future practitioners in both countries learn to respect each other's counsel and expertise in public relations problem solving and campaign planning. In the process, however, students are learning the communication difficulties they will have even as it may relate to the understanding of the terms commonly used in public relations in the United States. Terms such as "focus groups" and "opinion leaders" and "communication audits" may have new meanings when translated into another language and the differences in interpretation by not be immediately recognized by students working together on campaigns. In addition to cultural differences, which may be major in influencing campaign planning, students also learn that public relations can be perceived in very different ways in different parts of the world and that the differences will create new needs in how they accomplish tasks and in how they must work with professional counterparts in other countries. In both cases, students learn the need for an understanding of the historical reasons for cultural behaviors.

In conclusion, the experience of interaction has a value in the learning process that cannot be achieved with only the study of language, culture, or history of another part of the world in a classroom setting. Nor can it be replaced with study abroad visitation where the learning experience is limited to brief observation and cultural exposure experiences that may be unrelated to problem solving knowledge needs.

Face to face interaction and the group dynamic that results with young future professionals working together in planning public relations strategy on real projects for international clients results in a learning process that simply can not be achieved in any other formal. The greatest value may be the respect future international practitioners learn for each other in working toge-

ther as international teams .

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