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Designing Contemporary Learning Environments for Excellence in Public Relations Education

Dale Holt
Senior Lecturer, Education Design, Head: Education Design, Teaching and Learning Support Unit, Learning Services, Deakin University

and

Mark Sheehan
Senior Lecturer, Public Relations, School of Communication and Creative Arts, Faculty of Arts, Deakin University

Abstract Universities are striving to enhance the quality of the educational experience in the professions in response to external and internal pressures. The professional field of public relations (PR) is not immune to these forces. Previously, enhancements were often pursued through particular initiatives relating to curriculum, pedagogical or assessment redesign at the unit level. While such initiatives are valuable we argue for a strategic, integrated, programmatic approach. This requires the design of learning environments, with integrated virtual and physical dimensions, based on a relevant and meaningful curriculum, and student-centred approaches to learning. These learning environments enable quality learning in fields like public relations with diverse student cohorts studying on- and off-campus. The challenges involved in designing what we term ‘contemporary learning environments are illuminated through a case study of Deakin University’s Public Relations Program. Over the last three years redesigning PR online has led to changes curriculum, and pedagogical and assessment practices. We conclude by suggesting that a commitment to continuous quality improvement will be required to ensure the programs learning environment remains relevant to the needs of students studying in the field.

Introduction

Those involved in educating for the professions in higher education are confronting a broad range of pressing challenges. There are the obvious imperatives of dealing with an increasingly diverse students, decreased funding per student, and new information and communication technologies.
Beyond these lies the more fundamental question of what should now count as a quality learning experience in professional education. What should a quality professional curriculum look like? How should it be taught and assessed? With so many more options now available what is the appropriate mix of media/technology underpinning the curriculum and its pedagogies? How can academic knowledge/knowing/learning be integrated with practical knowledge/knowing/learning to support the development of professional capabilities in students? In short, we argue that to achieve excellence in education for the professions now demands a coherent and integrated view on the design of appropriate contemporary learning environments (Segrave & Holt 2003). Contemporary learning environments are defined, along with their characteristics in support of excellence in professional education.

Deakin University’s Public Relations program, offered in the Faculty of Arts, is used as a case study to illuminate the key features of contemporary learning environments. The PR program is offered at both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework levels, and is taught primarily at the University’s Geelong and Warrnambool campuses, in Victoria, Australia. The undergraduate program is taught to an annual intake of approximately 60 students. On-campus students are predominantly full-time school leavers. Off-campus students are mainly mature aged and in paid employment. In 2001, the Faculty committed to PR being a strategic program priority for online delivery. This development coincided with the influx of new staff to the program and an agreed need to review various aspects of it, including the currency of course materials. In taking the PR program appropriately online fundamental educational issues came into focus regarding the nature of a quality professional curriculum and pedagogy, and the University’s contribution to both the academic and practice-based components of the program. This paper considers these matters and identifies ongoing issues relating to designing and working within learning environments supportive of the quality education of students in the public relations field.

**Defining Contemporary Learning Environments**

Wilson (1996) defines a desirable learning environment as, ‘a place where learners may work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities’ (p. 5). The teacher’s role in such environments is to provide appropriate tools, learning resources, communication and collaborative possibilities that allow students to actively construct their
professional understandings and capabilities. The teacher guides, at times directs, and supports students' engagement with the learning environment in pursuit of professional development. The student is encouraged to be an active learner engaged with the array of learning possibilities in pursuit of the advancement of their professional conceptions and practices. 'A learning environment then, is a place where learning is fostered and supported (Wilson 1996, p. 4). While learning environments can be conceived at the institutional, faculty and school levels, the focus of our paper is to examine the nature of learning environments at the programmatic level, that is, the learning environment designed for fostering and supporting desired professional learning in public relations.

Critically, with the advent of information and communication technologies, contemporary learning environments now require that the online functions of the virtual dimension of such environments must be well integrated. Additionally the virtual dimension must be integrated with traditional media and activities in and around the environment's physical dimensions, the classroom and the workplace where the practicum (or work placement) is a key component of the professional curriculum.

The notion of the contemporary learning environment and its constituent learning communities is congruent with the theoretical perspective in PR which emphasises supporting mutually beneficial understandings and relationships between various parties with a vital interest or stake in the success or otherwise of an organisation. In this respect, Grunig (1992), referring to the work of Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), observes they defined public relations as interactive, cooperative, complex, communication that has the potential for helping create a sense of community (p. 7). The learning environment supporting such a curriculum goal should exhibit similar characteristics in both its virtual and physical dimensions.

Framework of Elements for Designing Learning Environments for Professional Education

Universities are making common strategic commitments to teaching and learning. A framework for understanding the elements of learning environments design for professional education is depicted in Table 1. These elements are grounded in insights into best practices in the professional field of learning. The framework focusses centrally on the learning environment enabling the development and assessment of desired graduate attributes. The Australian higher education sector has broadly adopted various statements of graduate attributes as the benchmark for
determining desired learning outcomes (see *Learning for Life Final Report* 1998, p. 47). The most recent statement of these attributes from industry's perspective can be found in a report on employability skills prepared for the Department of Education, Science and Training by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Business Council of Australia (2002, pp. 8-9):

- **Communication** that contributes to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- **Teamwork** that contributes to productive working relationships and outcomes
- **Problem solving** that contributes to productive outcomes
- **Initiative** and **enterprise** that contribute to innovative outcomes
- **Planning** and **organising** that contributes to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- **Self-management** that contributes to employee satisfaction and growth
- **Learning** that contributes to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- **Technology** that contributes to effective execution of tasks; and a lengthy list of
- **Personal attributes** that contribute to overall employability (for example, loyalty, honesty & integrity, adaptability) (our emphasis added).

Key external stakeholders increasingly wish to see evidence that these employability skills or graduate attributes are developed in undergraduate programs. In addition to the development of desired graduate attributes, strategic educational commitments are being made to experiential learning, particularly through expanded use of work placements; the internationalisation of the curriculum; greater use of new technology to facilitate a range of interactions between students, teaching staff, other university staff, and learning materials; and student-centred approaches to learning.

Student-centred approaches to learning represent a fundamental shift in the higher education teaching and learning paradigm. These student-
centred approaches see learning have been described as (Segrave & Holt 2003, in press):

- **goal oriented** (where goals are determined by teachers and understood by learners);
- **personally meaningful/relevant and active** (where learners actively construct their own knowledge understandings);
- **reflective** (where the emphasis is on knowledge use and problem solving);
- **collaborative** (where students at least part of time work as members of groups);
- **inclusive** (where each student has the best possible opportunity to achieve desired learning outcomes and diversity of perspectives is highly valued);
- **a partnership** (where teachers and learners work together productively).

All of these educational commitments need to be understood in the light of significant changes in international higher education. There is greater competition from private providers entering the industry, greater virtualisation of the industry supporting new competitors on a global scale, and greater demands for universities to contribute to the education of a new generations of knowledge workers - who can perform in a globalising information economy. Designing learning environments responsive to such trends requires a breadth of alignments aimed at developing prized student attributes. These alignments span the attributes of effective teaching and learning, appropriate forms of flexibility tailored to the needs of a diverse and dispersed student cohort, and the integration of key types of interaction in physical and virtual learning/teaching worlds. The context for these developments is the dynamic interplay of interests and expectations of internal and external parties with a stake in a program’s success.

**Case Study of Deakin’s Public Relations Program**

A professional program must have clear and well articulated alignments between what should be taught and learnt (and why), how learning is best enabled, how learning performance should be elicited through assessment practice and design, what sort of learning environment needs to be designed for quality learning outcomes, and how the overall impact of the program should be evaluated. The embedding of the PR program at Deakin within
an academic culture emphasising research and teaching in such interdisciplinary thematic areas may hold further evolutionary change for the PR curriculum in the future both at Deakin and elsewhere.

**What should be learnt and why? The changing nature of the PR curriculum**

Deakin's PR program is located within the Arts Faculty. Through a recent faculty restructure the program is grouped with other professional communication fields (for example, journalism) in the School of Communication and Creative Arts. The other school in the Faculty, the School of Social and International Studies, covers the key disciplines of politics, policy studies, sociology and anthropology. PR also has cross-faculty associations with management and marketing in the Faculty of Business and Law. The program's current curriculum represents a balance of perspectives from the arts, business and law. However, professional curricula are not static entities: they change and evolve through negotiations between various internal academic disciplinary perspectives, and the expectations of those from the profession and industry.

PR at Deakin has a strong sense of a core of professional or theoretical studies relevant to the field, and a strong appreciation of the range of skills required to maximise graduate students' employability in the industry. At the same time the program acknowledges that the boundaries of the field are changing and new possibilities are emerging. The inter-disciplinary perspectives which can be brought to bear on it through openness to intra- and inter-faculty scholarly efforts at least academically drive the changing shape and nature of the boundaries of PR. These developments continue to demand critical reflection on where the field of PR currently stands, its historical origins, its key theoretical and practical concerns, where the field might or should be heading, and what it might mean to be an effective practitioner in the field in the future. The Faculty of Arts central scholarly commitments to the study of ethics, social responsibility, democracy and sustainability in the context of the phenomenon of globalisation gives these considerations added impetus.

A significant development in the PR curriculum at Deakin relates to a unit covering a range of critical issues in public communication and citizenship. The unit draws upon thought provoking themes like:

- **The PR of PR**: why we can't do what we've always done
- **Risky business**: risk and reflexive modernity
- **Target markets, malls and plazas**: infiltration of the public sphere
• **Bright Planet:** Wired up and global: citizenship and public communication in the twenty first century

• **Active voices** (*ethics: self-interest and legitimacy. The rise of the public journalism movement*)

• **The cyber-citizenship** (*collective community action and its relationship with new technologies*)

• **Loud!** (*Public communication strategies Non Government Organisations and Community Action Groups*)

• **Mouth to mouth:** the birth of the public communication movement,

This unit engages with contemporary developments in public relations theory and practice to explore public communication’s links with citizenship, responsibility and accountability. The unit uses case studies of consultation with local and regional communities to analyse how organisations use formal and informal communication to achieve social, cultural and political change in a climate of increasing globalisation, and an increasing emphasis on corporate responsibility, accountability and citizenship. The unit pays particular attention to activism and new approaches in public relations and in journalism, and it examines how organisations can link ‘reputation management with the notions of corporate citizenship.

It is a major new strand to the PR curriculum congruent with Turnbull’s five hypotheses on an epistemology of public relations.

Turnbull’s first hypothesis states that while public relations education and training has been primarily market-driven, descriptive and atheoretical, there are now opportunities to develop new approaches to public relations practice and theory.

The second one states such approaches will be derived from the recognition that public relations is an activity which functions at the interface between best practice professional activity and all those disciplines which provide insights into human behaviours and attitudes.

In the third hypothesis Turnbull explains that the range and complexity of these disciplines are such that they can never be wholly-encompassed within an undergraduate setting and can only be assimilated through sustained lifelong learning strategies.
The fourth hypothesis examines the complexity and range of these disciplines are such that it may be impossible to provide a seamless connection between industry practice, education and training and research.

Turnbull's final hypothesis is that public relations education and training must be situated within a context which transcends the boundaries imposed by existing organisational structures and which creates new opportunities for interdisciplinary approaches.

Turnbull sees new ground being broken in public relations theorising, teaching and practice around, 'new critical theories regarding public relations which lead to both an understanding of an epistemology of public relations as well as enhancement of industry best practice. (Turnbull, 2002, p27-28.)

How should learning be enabled? Pedagogies for active, applied professional learning

The curriculum provides a strong sense of the central theoretical and practical concerns of the field of professional practice. It is easy, however, for the teachers of the profession to take the lead in imparting this information to their students who passively and individually make sense of it. Student-centred approaches to learning locate the student at the centre of the educational experience and actively encourage him or her to construct conceptions of the field and self-develop and assess professional attitudes and skills. This requires the use of a range of teaching methods or active pedagogies supportive of both collaborative and independent student learning. In these scenarios, students see each other, significant others in their personal and professional worlds, along with their teachers, as potential resources for supporting their professional development.

A key pedagogy for shaping learning environments relating to educating for professional competence is the practicum. As with many professional courses in higher education, the practicum is a strong feature of Deakin's PR program. Schon (1987) defines the practicum as:

A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context that approximates a practice world, students learn by doing, although their doing usually falls short of real-world work. They learn by undertaking projects that simulate and simplify practice; or they take on real-world projects under close supervision. The practicum is a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures,
distractions, and risks of the real one, to which nevertheless, it refers. It stands in an intermediate space between the practice world, the “lay” world of ordinary life, and the esoteric world of the academy. It is also a collective world in its own right, with its own mix of materials, tools, languages, and appreciations. It embodies particular ways of seeing, thinking, and doing that tend, over time, as far as the student is concerned, to assert themselves with increasing authority.

...The work of the practicum is accomplished through some combination of the students learning by doing, her interactions with coaches and fellow students, and a more diffuse process of “background learning”. (p. 37 & p. 38)

The practicum might be case analysis in the classroom undertaken as a virtual simulation, work placement, or a fieldwork project in industry. Deakin’s PR program runs a summer, out-of-academic-semester work placement, followed by an in-semester Internship unit at the start of the final year of study. Concurrently, with the Internship unit a major fieldwork project is undertaken as part of a PR Campaigns unit. Recent developments have seen a strengthening of preparation for the work placement through more formal guidance on searching and selecting an appropriate placement, the keeping of a learning journal, and the preparation of a learning portfolio of significant PR assignment work undertaken over the course. The post work placement experience through the Internship is enhanced through reflective individual and group assignment work supported by online cases resources and discussion spaces. The unit also provides prospective advice and insights into securing and performing well in one’s first job in the industry on graduation. An issue of ongoing deliberation is the absence of formal academic teaching support during the work placement itself, as a means of further guiding and directing students actual professional learning on the job.

Fundamentally, program pedagogies must encourage and support active and applied professional learning. Students must see the integrative potentials of the worlds of academic learning and practice learning through a cyclic process of experiencing, reflecting, theorising and acting upon their developing professional conceptions and practices (see Kolb 1984). To this end an online Professional Capabilities Development Profile was designed and is located in the program’s foundation unit. The Profile seeks to stimulate students from the course’s beginning to self-assess the development of their professional attitudes, knowledge and skills. The professional curriculum has academic and fieldwork dimensions linked by pedagogy increasingly requiring considered self-reflection and action individually and in groups. Through the undergraduate experience students
must develop the know-how of performing effectively as a PR professional, an appreciation of the changing nature of the profession, and the required capabilities in the future.

**How should the learning environment be designed? Towards the integration of media/technology elements**

There is a growing array of traditional, digital and online learning resources available in professional courses in higher education. Students can be overwhelmed and confused by all that might be offered. Indiscriminate engagement with a wealth of resources leads to work overload and poor quality learning. The PR program has attempted to use a judicious mix of prepackaged learning resources and communication/collaboration possibilities in its constituent units. The design task has been to clearly delineate the educational purposes of each learning resource, and ensure their effective integration (Holt et al. 2002). There are layers and sub-categories of integration. Printed study guides, textbooks and readers need to be integrated. Topics within units need to be aligned, as do the relationships between units. Traditional print resources need to be well integrated with audio-visual materials, and various online functions need to be well integrated with each other. Communication and collaboration online and in the classroom must come together.

At a broader level, the physical and virtual dimensions of the program's learning environment need to be mapped and integrated (see Table 1) for the purposes of supporting the curriculum and pedagogy for different student cohorts studying on- and off-campus. The advent of corporate technologies like learning management systems and content management repositories raises further hope for customised and personalised just-in-time learning tailored to the needs of particular cohorts. Deakin is strongly committed to such developments. The challenge of unlocking the possibilities of these corporate technologies is not straightforward. It represents a considerable challenge across higher education for those involved in professional programs like PR.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Virtual dimensions of environment</th>
<th>Physical dimensions of environment</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Integrated Subject matter guidance grounded in units of the program;</td>
<td>• Real computer environment and computer/human interfaces;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Integrated guidance on learning processes, i.e. undertaking PR cases, group assignments, PR planning, learning journal &amp; learning portfolio;</td>
<td>• Print study guides, textbooks &amp; readers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learning activities based on integrated digital media resources;</td>
<td>• Group &amp; individual assignments;</td>
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<td>• Internet &amp; intranet searches;</td>
<td>• Oral group presentations;</td>
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<td>• Academic and social synchronous &amp; asynchronous discussions;</td>
<td>• Learning journal;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Role play and debate online;</td>
<td>• Learning portfolio;</td>
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<td>• Email and feedback opportunities;</td>
<td>• Work placements;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Group case work supported online;</td>
<td>• Lectures and tutorials;</td>
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<td>• Individual research project supported online;</td>
<td>• Analogue AV resources;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• E-Professional Capabilities Development Profile</td>
<td>• Fieldwork and investigations;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Online quizzes;</td>
<td>• Work in IT laboratories on-campus;</td>
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<td>• PR@Deakin online for course promotion;</td>
<td>• Work in library on-campus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Online academic &amp; administrative services and resources;</td>
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**How should student learning be elicited and judged? New commitments to collaborative and reflective forms of assessment**

How do we know how much and how well students have learnt through their PR studies? Designing learning environments is very much about providing opportunities for students to pursue and demonstrate their learning consistent with the goals of the program. In this respect, assessment, both formal and informal, individual, peer or teacher driven, is integral to the learning experience. It is aligned with the program's curriculum and pedagogies, and supported by the various resources and tools provided within its learning environment. Consistent with other progressive professional programs, PR has broadened the range of opportunities for students to evidence their learning, namely: learning journal and portfolio records, reflective individual and group practicum assignments; case study analyses; fieldwork and research projects; article reviews; professional capabilities development profile; and role plays and simulations. The national trends are toward assessable work being conducted in-person and online; presented in multiple media formats; related strongly to real-world contexts, allowing students a degree of choice in determining the nature of their work; encouraging self-, peer- as well as teacher judgement of worth; requiring individual and group written and oral presentations, consolidating key subject concepts; being judged by external as well as internal parties; and focussing on both process as well as solution. The ways in which assessment tasks are embedded within the learning environment can be seen in Table 1. They are centrally directed at cultivating desired graduate attributes.

**Conclusion:**

**Advancing Quality Education for Excellence in Public Relations Practice**

Educating for professional excellence in public relations represents a multi-faceted challenge as the Deakin case study illuminates. A formidable agenda for ongoing reflection and action is presented by new and diverse student groups; demands for greater flexibility even from those who study full-time on-campus; the pressures to find enduring educational value in corporate technology investments; the demands to deliver on graduate attributes that underpin student employability; and the problematising of the key concerns and issues of the field increasingly with an international and global context. In such times of change and flux, it will be a continuing commitment to active participation in these debates and experimentation
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with different practices that will provide the best opportunities to advance the quality of education for excellence in public relations practice. This demands continuous quality improvement across several related fronts driven by a spirit of academic innovation.

References


