

Enhancing First Year Experience in the Introductory Public Relations Unit

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Abstract

*Each semester and year I update my curriculum and search for ways to improve the student experience, with a focus on the first year. This ensures innovative and relevant practice that enables students to study in their own time, supported by ICT-enabled learning resources. In the past twelve months I have developed my practice to focus on advanced blended learning strategies. The UWS iPad initiative and the University's commitment to blended learning have provided an opportunity to explore ways to make learning more accessible and flexible, most notably with the creation of an iBook workbook for the first year public relations unit, *Public Relations Theory and Practice*. In 2013, I rewrote this unit to incorporate advanced blended learning strategies (focusing on the use of mobile devices/tablets and social media) to facilitate access for my students, increase their level of active learning, and achieve better student experiences and outcomes.*

Introduction

In recent history, Australian universities have shifted their focus from elite to mass education (Nunan, 1999). Given that the number of students entering higher education has risen considerably in the last decade, a range of challenges exist for universities interested in retaining positive outcomes for all students, as they strive to innovatively cater for the evolving needs of such a diverse group of students (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001).

The modern day academic is also experiencing the ramifications of decreased funding at both the school and institutional level. This has resulted in a work culture of increasing, competitive demands exacerbated by reduced administrative support, increasing class sizes, growing teaching loads and the constant expectation of research outcomes. This pressure is resulting in a culture focused on performance, that has implications for academics working in the field who are committed to the “transformative role of higher education” (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010).

In response, the student culture is also undergoing constant transformation. The shift to mass education has resulted in an increasingly diverse student population that includes students from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). This diversity has created a change in commencing student expectations and forced the sector to make practical and conceptual changes to how academics approach teaching and learning (Longden, 2006).

During their first year, university students undergo the transition from pedagogy to andragogy (adult learning) and Knowles et al. (2005), argues that this transition starts with expecting adult students to take control of their own learning, building on the opportunity to use their own experiences. In recent years, a significant body of literature has given credence to the view that a range of strategies for engaging first year undergraduate students makes a

positive difference to first year retention and the individual experience of students (Larmar & Ingamells, 2010). This presentation reports on a range of effective unit-based strategies that have been informed by the current body of knowledge, designed to use blended learning strategies to facilitate access for students, increase their level of active learning, and achieve better student experiences and outcomes.

Overview

Public Relations Theory and Practice is the introductory public relations unit that all Bachelor of Communication students undertake in their first year of study at the University of Western Sydney. I have been the unit coordinator since 2008, making changes each year based on student feedback and innovations in technology, to improve and enhance its delivery. First year students are more likely to remain at university if they experience a high level of engagement and feel supported by their university and by academic staff (Scutter & Wood, 2009). I have built support for students into my curricula, pedagogy and resources for this unit. Initiatives I have made include the early adoption of blended learning pedagogies by moving 25% of the unit assessment online. This supports students by providing more flexibility in the way they access assessment items in their first year of study. In addition, as the unit coordinator I provide 24/7 feedback through online discussion boards and have provided other resources online, such as links to professional associations, educational material on YouTube, and library support. The curriculum engages students with social media, including Facebook and Twitter (to both communicate with students, connect them with industry contacts, and engage them in their learning).

In 2013, I built on my years of experience with technologies to embrace the UWS iPad initiative. As part of the University's Blended Learning Strategy, an Apple iPad was provided to all commencing undergraduate students in 2013 and 2014. This mobile technology enables students to engage with the growing number of online services – such as online lectures, library services, iBooks, apps and other tools that aim to provide the best possible learning and university experience. The Bachelor of Communication was delivered at Parramatta campus for the first time in Autumn 2013. I made subtle changes to the delivery of the unit to accommodate the unique needs of a new cohort in their first semester of study, including a guided tour of the unit and demonstration of iPad use in week 1. My major innovation in this unit was the introduction of an iBook workbook in Autumn 2013. Aware of transition issues, the iBook was designed to provide an “all-in-one” study companion to guide students through the unit as they made their transition from the structure of secondary school to the independence of tertiary learning. The workbook was made available free for students to download from vUWS in iBook format (and PDF) to the iBook app on their iPads (or tablet, computer or smartphone).

The iBook contains embedded video, quizzes, homework and tutorial questions, examples of assessment items, and widgets designed to guide students through the whole unit of study. In addition to these interactive features, the students are also able to write notes in their workbook using a stylus or keyboard. Feedback from students throughout Autumn semester indicated the workbook eased their transition to university as it provided simple and easy-to-understand instructions for navigating their way through the unit. When asked in the Autumn 2013 SFU surveys what the “Best Aspects” of the unit were, answers such as the following demonstrate the success of the iBook and that the students felt well supported in this unit: *“Use of iPads integration with learning (iBooks)”* and *“The guidelines of this course was straight forward and able to maintain.”*

I conducted a survey at the end of Autumn 2013 titled “Using iBook workbooks in Public Relations Theory and Practice”. Over 88% of students agreed that “Overall, the unit workbook was an effective tool that encouraged me to engage with the unit and provided a helpful framework for my work during the semester”. The fact that students felt supported in this unit is evidenced by student statements such as:

“I personally think that the way the entire PR unit is set up is great, it is much more organised compared to my other units. The iBook helped me not forget to get anything done and keeps me up to date with both summaries and issue brief activities.”

These statements assured me that that I had designed a highly effective resource in the iBook that was enhancing my already technology rich curricula. In addition to the iBook, I have made other important changes in 2013 that built on my continuing curricula innovations and employment of new technologies:

- New compulsory textbook in an e-book format for ease of use on the iPad. In addition, I have updated all lectures, with creation of additional resources to enable note-taking on the iPad. The lecture notes are complemented by a range of online resources that are woven into the curriculum.
- New and interactive tutorial activities that can be worked on in groups using iPads. Tutorial activities encourage problem solving and independent learning and analysis by linking public relations theory to contemporary practice. The flexibility of delivery is also enhanced by the fact that students can either work on activities related to the weekly lecture and textbook content, or on their major assessment (called the Issue Brief). Depending on the individual needs of the class, the type of activity completed that week is at the discretion of the class tutor. Many students used the SFU surveys to comment on this “Best Aspect” of the curriculum: *“How helpful the tutorials were as they constantly worked on both our course work and assignments”* and *“Being able to do activities individually and in groups then going over it with the teacher to make sure we did it right. Having a teacher/student understanding and learning”*.
- New assessable homework activities students submit online on their iPads. These activities are directly related to the lecture material and readings for that week to reinforce knowledge and skills. The regular online homework exercises appeared to be particularly helpful in supporting students, and featured among the “Best Aspects” of the unit answers in the Autumn 2013 SFU surveys: *“Homework tasks were effective in further investigation and learning”* and *“The homework questions every fortnight helped with me keeping up with work instead of slacking off.”*

The changes made to the first year public relations curriculum were informed by Kift (2008), who describes the need for a “transition pedagogy” that tailors the curriculum for first-year students. Many elements of a quality first-year curriculum are common to all courses. However, there are also particular elements that are crucial to the first-year curriculum. These elements include: being relevant to and informing vocational aspirations early in the course, assisting students’ transition from their previous experiences to studying at a tertiary level, providing students with formative feedback early in their courses, and facilitating quality and authentic learning experiences by encouraging students to take an active role in and responsibility for their own learning.

Results

Engaging students in the first year core units of our degree is critical. My unit Public Relations Theory and Practice has a proven track record of achieving this engagement aim. It was the core first year unit in the Bachelor of Communication that recorded improved SFU results in Spring 2011, scoring 4.0 for “Overall experience” and in Autumn 2013, has improved again with scores for all categories in the SFU and SFT surveys increasing (see tables below). Most dramatic improvement was group interaction (SFT) and Learning Resources, Learning Design and Assessment Feedback and Guidelines (SFU).

SFT (Response rate 63%)	2012	2013
Learning/academic value	6.3	7.5
Organisation/clarity	6.5	8.0
Group interaction	6.5	8.0
Breadth of coverage	6.3	7.8
Overall rating	6.1	7.9

Student Feedback on Teaching Results: Public Relations Theory and Practice (2012/13)

SFU (Response rate 60%)	2012	2013
Unit content	4.0	4.4
Relevance	4.1	4.2
Learning Design	3.8	3.9
Assessment activities	3.9	4.0
Assessment feedback	3.4	3.8
Assessment guidelines	3.9	4.1
Learning resources	3.6	4.1
Overall Experience	3.9	4.2

Student Feedback on Unit Results: Public Relations Theory and Practice (2012/13)

These improved scores relate directly to my innovations with curricula design, encouraging more interaction amongst students and with professionals, and with resources such as new technologies to encourage learning and support assessment. Student engagement and

influence on their learning is also evidenced by the dramatic improvement in assessment results, particularly between 2012 and 2013. In 2013, the percentage of HDs doubled along with marked increases in the percentage of Ds and Cs. Most importantly, the AF rate reduced from 15% of the unit cohort in 2012 to 9% in 2013, and NO students failed the unit in 2013 (compared to 5% in 2012).

Enticing students to the public relations profession

One of the issues with the public relations professional major, is that many students are unsure about what public relations entails. Another aim of my curriculum design strategy was to raise the level of awareness and understanding of our profession for the first year cohort in time for the students to make their subject selections for their second year of study.

In addition to updating and streamlining the first year public relations curriculum, I arranged a guest lecturer, to attend during the semester and describe their experiences of working as a public relations practitioner and how their profession works in synergy with the other professions of the degree (i.e. journalists, advertising practitioners and media production personnel). This “real” experience provided students with a deeper understanding of both the variety of tasks involved in the public relations profession and the integration with the other media and communication specialties. The Autumn 2013 SFU results clearly indicate that this strategy was a success. “Best Aspects” of the unit were described as: *“Learning and enjoying something that I didn’t think I would enjoy. I started this unit thinking the PR wasn’t a very interesting subject, but it turned out to be more interesting than I first thought”*.

The success of the first year Public Relations unit have been recognised as an exemplar by the University. I have been awarded with:

- Team winner of the UWS Teaching and Learning Award in 2012 for ‘Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning’.
- Team winner of the UWS Teaching and Learning Award in 2013 for ‘Excellence in Teaching’ for the team ‘Enhancing Participation in the Public Relations major: Producing Strong Graduate Outcomes’
- Individual winner of the UWS Teaching and Learning Award in 2013 for ‘Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning’.

My success in enhancing the engagement of first year students through implementation of new technologies in the core public relations unit is evidenced by student and colleague feedback, dramatic improvements in SFT and SFU results, and positive changes in assessment results for the 2013 cohort.

Discussion

The student outcomes resulting from my curriculum enhancements were similar to other studies, particularly in the area of mobile technology. Utilising mobile technology in the university teaching space is not a new concept. However, with increasing numbers of students having access to smartphones and tablets, this is an area that has gained popularity in recent years. Manuguerra and Petocz (2011) found mobile technology such as iPads has the potential to fundamentally change education through constructivist, collaborative and adaptive approaches to teaching and learning. Recently higher education institutions have

reported successful case studies of mobile technology implementation and learning outcomes. Many of these authors argue that the integration of mobile technology into the classroom motivates students and offers opportunities for collaboration (Johnston & Marsh, 2013). Wong (2012) notes that technology makes classes more collaborative and interactive as iPads allow students to make notes, read from electronic texts and get real time results from quizzes.

Students enrolled in Public Relations Theory and Practice at UWS reported similar outcomes to those involved in Bond-Raacke and Raacke's (2008) study, where they felt tablets made classes interactive and engaging and that the use of this type of technology enhanced the class. This is evidenced by student comments such as: "...we go through it as a class, making it more interactive which helps and benefits me in my learning. This is why my favourite way to learn is to discuss topics and activities as well as hear other peoples intakes on things as well as points of view" and "It was engaging and enhanced curriculum activity. Thank you for making it easier on first year students!"

Like Manuguerra and Petocz (2011) who found that when mobile technologies were seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, the use of such technologies enhanced students' learning and motivation levels, my students reported similar effects. Comments such as "it gave me an outline as to what I should compete, meaning Im not stressed about doing it all at once.mit gave me incentive and clear plan as to what to do" and "I found extremely helpful in my studies. Things were simple and easy to use every tasks as set out clearly".

The ease of use and enhanced learning environment created by mobile technology is not only beneficial to students. Johnston and Marsh (2013) describe the collaborative process between library staff and teaching staff of embedding information literacy into an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) foundations (bridging) course through an information literacy matrix, iBooks and iPad apps. They found that embedding information literacy into the curriculum through iPads and iBooks created new opportunities for library staff to collaborate with teaching staff and professional development opportunities for library staff. Feedback from teaching staff about the iBooks indicated that the "hands on" nature of the activities and the interactivity contributed to student engagement in the lessons. Geist (2011) found that in a study on iPad use in the higher education sector, teaching staff enjoyed the convenience of having information instantly available in the classroom rather than having to go to a computer lab and that group work became more efficient and convenient.

The blended learning initiatives employed to enrich the student experience in Public Relations Theory and Practice could also be applied more broadly to other contexts and situations, to not only enhance the first year experience, but carry forward to future years of study. In 2014 I created a similar workbook for one of the second year Public Relations units, Events Management, and I have also been charged with the task of creating one for 2015 for the Communication Strategies unit. The iBook format is easily adaptable to all disciplines and could function both as a workbook (as is the case for the iBook I created), and as a supplementary textbook, an interactive learning guide, and even an assessment tool, with the ability to build quizzes and assessments into the iBook format. As a result of its success in enhancing the first year Public Relations unit, my iBook has become an exemplar for future electronic student support materials and resources, including the UWS *School of Humanities and Communication Arts* First Year Handbook iBook. This handbook was developed by the school and successfully rolled out for student use in Autumn semester 2014.

Although there have been a number of articles discussing the impact of mobile technology on teaching and learning in the higher education environment, more empirical data is needed that provides evidence of the effectiveness of using iPads, and more specifically iBooks, in the classroom.

Key Questions/Discussion Points

- How has your school/institution responded to the changing student cohort?
- What role does blended learning play in your first year experience?
- Have you incorporated iBooks/e-books as a strategy to engage first year students? If so, how. If not, how can you see yourself using these tools to help optimise the first year experience?

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Teaching the Introductory Public Relations Course: A Communication Perspective. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.; Speech Communication Association, Annandale, Va. Expressing a communication perspective on teaching public relations, this booklet is designed for instructors of public relations courses. The introduction to the booklet establishes the theoretical grounding of this investigation, namely, the mutual relationship between public relations and communication. The first section explicates the communication perspective for teaching public relations. The second section provides a series of examples of typical communication problems facing contemporary public relations practitioners. Thus, public relations appears before us as a system of actions, the purpose of which is the successful implementation of a project. In our opinion, there are no significant differences between compromise and pragmatic approaches. For the first time officially the expression "public relations" was used by US President Thomas Jefferson, when in 1807 in the draft of his "Seventh Address to Congress" he wrote it, instead of the crossed out "state of thought". But the practice of classical PR originates in 1902. The History of science under the name "Public Relations", according to some researchers, began with the events that Russian authors K. V. Antipov and Yu. Public relations is a large discipline that can be subdivided into many types of functions. There are four primary areas of functional responsibility or different locales in which we can categorize the profession of public relations: Corporate public relations. Agency public relations. In the earlier chapter briefly outlining public relations subfunctions, we promised more specificity on how those functions actually operate within an organization. Corporate Social Responsibility. In recent years a number of agencies have chosen to specialize in corporate philanthropy programs. They work with clients to determine areas in which they can match their areas of expertise with global human needs, such as hunger, health, the environment, and poverty.