Scaffolding Public Relations Projects in an Undergraduate Journalism Course
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Summary: A journalism professor reflects on students' learning from a large, scaffolded group project, in which students were asked to construct a public relations plan for the Lawrence Arts Center.

Background
Principles of Public Relations (J 523) is one of the core courses offered in the School of Journalism for the Bachelor of Science degree and is generally taken during the junior or senior year. About 80 students enroll in this course during the fall semester, while a smaller group of about 50 students enroll in the class each spring. Students must have successfully completed prerequisite courses in the School before entering this course; these prerequisites require students to competently write for various types of media, consider how the First Amendment applies to the profession, critically analyze the operation of media, and consider how to effectively reach an audience through strategic planning. Principles of Public Relations builds on these other courses and is designed to provide a detailed look at the processes of public relations (PR), including what the profession is, how PR fits into the scope of strategic communication, and how the profession theoretically should be. This course also serves as a pre-requisite for the senior capstone course (Campaigns) and prepares students for a career in public relations or a related field.

I hope that students will leave the class with something new. During my first two offerings of this course, students commented that they had already learned the course material in previous classes. While I want to reinforce existing knowledge, I would like to incorporate timely information that will be beneficial to them as they move to the senior capstone course and provide information that will be more than just textbook information. I believe that students should ask themselves why PR is such an important and valued part of the day-to-day operations of any business, corporation and/or organization. Public relations is more than a "gut" feeling and should be treated as a management/business function.

Therefore, my goals for this course are to:
  ➢ Create an understanding of the practice of public relations, as well as the profession's history, contemporary issues and role in democratic societies.
  ➢ Emphasize critical thinking, especially in the research and planning phases of the public relations process.
  ➢ Encourage problem-solving skills in both individual and collaborative environments.
  ➢ Establish a professional and ethical foundation on which the future practitioner can build a successful and distinguished career.

Implementation

In earlier offerings of this course, I asked students to examine case studies in a group and then lead a discussion of the cases with the rest of the class, in an attempt to meet my course goals. While this exercise was successful, I wanted students to more fully understand the process of "doing" public relations. Therefore, for the most recent offering, I structured the course around a large-scale group project, which culminated with students' construction of a public relations plan for a local business. I hoped to really excite students to go beyond the textbook and tear down the myth that PR is common knowledge.

During the semester, students completed a number of assignments to build their understanding of public relations. In addition to case study analyses and weekly assignments, most work was aimed at the completion of a public relations plan. The PR plan was scaffolded across the semester, as students constructed and received feedback on a research memo, a planning grid, and an analysis of project goals and objectives, before compiling these subcomponents into a final project plan. Each assignment is discussed on the following pages.

Group Project

Public relations practitioners often work in teams, collaborating with each other to effectively communicate to their publics through strategic planning and research. Therefore, this assignment was designed to mirror the collaborative process of public relations. Each student was assigned to a group consisting of five or six individuals, and each group was responsible for preparing a public relations plan for the Lawrence Arts Center (LAC; www.lawrenceartscenter.com). The groups were further randomly assigned to be either a "Red Team" or a "Blue Team." The Red Teams were asked to construct a public relations plan to increase awareness of adult participation in LAC classes and the sources of funding for the LAC, while the Blue Teams were asked to construct a public relations plan that increased awareness of the inclusive nature of the LAC and the affordable pricing of classes. The plan was structured as a four-step process, so that students could receive meaningful feedback along the way.

Part 1. <u>Research Memo.</u> The Research Memo assignment was the first part of the project plan, and each student in the group completed a separate research memo. The memo consisted of a summary of at least five sources that were relevant to the project's issues. For instance, students could summarize how organizations with similar missions have attempted to increase awareness and dispel misconceptions about their organization, or they could summarize an interview that they conducted with an individual about the issues raised by the LAC project. Students' memos were assessed on a 100 point scale, and the breakdown of points was as follows:

Relevance of research to the project	20 points
Detail and substance of summaries	40 points
Quality and variety of sources	10 points
Adherence to guidelines	10 points
Spelling/grammar/clarity	20 points

Part 2. <u>Planning Grid.</u> In this task, groups were asked to first identify the goals for their client, using the research that they had conducted for the Research Memo assignment. Each individual in the group then constructed a grid to address the publics (the stakeholders), the compelling stake that each public had in the project, the message (the statement that motivates specific

publics to take a desired action), and the media appropriate for communicating with the target audience. The grading scheme for the assignment is located <u>here</u> (Planning Grid Grading Scheme).

Part 3. <u>Goals and Objectives Assignment.</u> In this component of the project, each group was asked to draft an outline of their project goals and to identify the particular objectives that were required to meet those goals. For instance, if the goal was to create public support for recruiting Acme Widget Company to a particular community, then an objective might be to create publicity to inform stakeholders of the importance of attracting Acme to the community in a timely fashion. This assignment was assessed in terms of appropriateness of the goals (20 points), appropriateness of the objectives (20 points), and clarity/spelling/grammar (10 points).

Part 4. <u>Final Project and Group Presentation</u>**.** The objective of the final project for the course was twofold. The final project was a marker of the culmination of project activities and also a compilation of final materials to be presented to the client. The objective was for students to not only research, plan a strategy, and present the client with a finished product that could be implemented, but also they were given the task to present the plan to the client to allow an opportunity for feedback.

The final project consisted of two parts: a written report and an oral presentation. For the written report, each group produced a final public relations plan for the Lawrence Arts Center. The plan included their executive summary, a situational analysis (drawn from the Research Memo assignment), a list of the target audiences and stakeholders (drawn from the Planning Grid Assignment), their goals, objectives and tactics (drawn from the Goals and Objectives Assignment), and a list of the sources that were used when compiling the report. In this way, the final written project was a compilation of the individual pieces of the assignment that had been produced prior, and on which they had already received feedback. The grades for the written presentation were determined as follows:

Executive summary	20 points
Situation Analysis	25 points
Target Audiences/Stakeholders	25 points
Goals, objectives and tactics	50 points
Sources of information	5 points
Spelling/grammar/clarity/format	25 points
TOTAL POINTS	150 points

Each group also gave a five to ten minute oral presentation based on their communications plan. Students were told that they should present their plan as though they were a public relations agency presenting a plan to a client. The presentations addressed the following elements: A situation analysis, a brief description of the target audience(s), the goals, objectives and tactics, and the proposed budget. The grade for the in-class presentation was determined as follows:

Situation Analysis	10 points
Target Audiences/Stakeholders	5 points
Goals, objectives and tactics	20 points
Budget	5 points
Quality of Presentation	10 points

TOTAL POINTS   50 points

While the project grade was assigned to all group members, individual student effort was taken into account in the grade calculations. Students provided evaluations of their own performance on the group project, as well as the performance of their other group members. Poor performance in the group resulted in a negative grade adjustment for two individuals this semester.

In addition to the group project, students also completed the following:

Case Study Summaries
In groups of four or five, students were asked to read and write two analyses of case studies. This assignment required groups to role play the case during class; each group member adopted a role, such as the public relations professional, the client, or the target audience. For instance, when we addressed the topic of research, students read a case study of a company or organization that failed at incorporating research into its public relations planning. The case study assignments allowed me to address the goals of this course, because students were challenged to take a real-world situation and apply the basic elements of the public relations process to it.

Exams
Two exams and a final exam were given, based on assigned readings, classroom lectures, and guest lectures. Most exam questions were multiple-choice, in addition to two short essay questions.

Weekly Assignments and Attendance
Finally, students completed weekly readings and six assignments in preparation for lectures and discussion in class. These assignments assisted students by increasing their background in the material and were used as a measure of attendance and engagement with course material.

Midterm Feedback and Alterations in Course Structure
At the midpoint of the semester, I asked students to provide open-ended feedback about their views regarding the direction of the class to that point. The most consistent comment that I received was that students would appreciate some additional guidance and time spent on discussions regarding the nature of the group project plan and presentation.

In response to these comments, I made the following changes, as outlined in the updated syllabus

1) I increased the amount of time that I was available for consultation. Groups were asked to meet with me, and this gave me the ability to spend more time in conversation with students to assist with presentation design and to clarify my expectations about the project.
2) There was significant confusion on the Planning Grid component of the group project, so I allowed revisions and resubmissions of this assignment.
3) I also eliminated one of the six weekly assignments that students were asked to complete during the semester, as it was not directly relevant to the group project. While an important topic, I found that we could cover the material in class while freeing up some of the students' time to work on the group assignment.

Student Performance

Overall, students performed well in this course. The final grade distribution was as follows: 9 As, 11 A⁻s, 16 B⁺s, 12 Bs, 5 B⁻s, 1 C⁺, and 1 incomplete. The final project was worth 20% of the final grade, so students who may not have done well on exams or individual assignments could have benefited from the group project grade.

Research Memo

Students' performance was generally quite strong on the research memo assignment, with an average grade of 89%, with a range of scores between 73% to 100%. There were a few who struggled with the types of sources to include (e.g., research that didn't have to do with the issues that related to the LAC's concerns; multiple perspectives on the issue were not addressed). Before the semester, I worked with Julie Petr, a KU librarian (www.lib.ku.edu) to discuss the assignment that students would be conducting and the resources that students should access. Julie then gave an in-class presentation about research and the different databases that were available to students. Below are examples of the Research Memo assignment.

Student A Research Memo (Strong Paper)
Both the original memo and the student's resubmission are included in this document. While the original research memo submitted by this student did not address the appropriate objectives of the project (s/he addressed the objectives of the Red Team instead of the Blue Team objectives), the resubmitted assignment adheres to all of the major guidelines for the content of the assignment. The resubmitted memo provides appropriate consideration of how the conducted research is related to the goals and objectives of their client's project. However, in the resubmission, the student fails to adhere to some technical aspects of the research memo, including not following the required length, failure to follow stylistic rules consistent with a business memo (e.g., spacing, alignment of text, appropriate addressing of audience), and committing grammatical errors throughout the submitted assignment.

Student B (Weaker Paper)
Again, both the original and revised resubmissions of the assignment are included in this document. This student's memo provided appropriate citations, but there was not an appropriate amount of variety in the sources. This assignment was intended to encourage students to collect secondary research and consider how organizations, similar in structure to the LAC, had met their goals and objectives, but this student did not collect ample variety in resources in order to appropriately connect the research to the task at hand.

Planning Grid

This assignment was more difficult for students than I anticipated, and a common issue was that students' demonstrated a propensity for confusing the language between stake and message (where stake is the investment of the target audience, and message is the type and manner of information that is conveyed to that target audience). For instance, the LAC wanted to increase the amount of involvement of adults aged 25-35 at the center, but this task is challenging because of the perception of the LAC as being elitist. So, to address this issue in their planning grid, students should have considered: What would this target audience want to see? What would they want to get out of participation at the LAC? What would reduce the barrier of perceived elitism? Using this information, they should have then developed a message to address and reduce these

perceptions. For instance, they might have created a message that said that young adults should become involved at the LAC because they have classes for the 25-35 year old age group, the classes are affordable, and there are classes for their young children.

There were 25 As, 23Bs, and 7 Cs on this assignment; the average grade was a 44/50 (86%), with a range of grades from 35-50 points. However, while the grades were strong, I was not overly happy with the level of performance, which suggests to me that I may need to modify my assessment criteria for this component of the project. Additionally, the timing of the introduction of the assignment should be re-assessed. In particular, I would introduce this assignment earlier in the semester. Moving this assignment to earlier in the semester would allow me to provide students with a greater number of examples and opportunities to practice applying the client's problems to a planning grid. While I did provide an example of the Watkins Health Center and how to introduce HIV testing, the target audience was students, so students may have only been thinking about the student experience, and the request to extend the audience to the community may have been particularly challenging. The next time that I teach this class, I will provide additional examples that are more closely aligned with the client.

Examples of students' work on the planning grid are provided below.

Student A (Strong Paper)
This student's planning grid assignment followed all of the guidelines, and overall it was a strong paper. S/he demonstrated a strong use of publics and stakes to represent both the LAC and the other audiences that they target. However, the student could have provided a more diverse offering of media for the target audience (or public) and crystallize the message for the intended audience.

Student B (Weaker Paper)
This student's assignment followed several of the guidelines (including the language for the stakes and message portions of the assignment); however, s/he failed to provide appropriate examples. For example, the student provided the wrong type of target audience and the media that would be used to reach those targeted audiences.

Objective and Goals Assignment
This assignment was the first assignment for which the groups received a group-level grade, rather than individual assessment. Out of the ten groups, most did well after they received my feedback on their rough drafts, and 44 of the 55 students in the class received an A on this component of the project. However, other groups did not respond appropriately to the feedback they received. Some of the issues from the Planning Grid assignment in terms of differentiating stake and message, as well as overall comprehension of the project, carried over here. In particular, some groups struggled with understanding the difference between a goal and an objective. A goal is an overarching statement about what you want to achieve, while an objective is a more specific, targeted, measurable statement that can be carried out by a public-relations tactic. For the LAC, a goal could be increasing awareness about affordable programs at the LAC, while an objective could be publicizing an event. The tactic would be a news release that carries out publicizing the event. To assess the effectiveness of that tactic, you might publish a news release in a newspaper and examine the rate and spread of that news release to the public.

As I do not have consent from all members of a group to use the examples of their work in this portfolio, I cannot provide linked examples of the Objectives and Goals Assignment or the Final Project. However, my observations of the work are as follows:

For strong assignments, students clearly outlined two goals and two objectives which were relevant to their project and their target audience. The strong assignments provided a clear plan for the groups' ultimate public relations plan and full proposal. When issues were observed in this group, it was typically in terms of implementation of their goals and objectives. For example, one group did not describe their timeline for achieving their goals, and they did not clearly describe how the efficacy of their project plan would be assessed.

In the weaker assignments, students demonstrated trouble differentiating between a goal and an objective, or identifying relevant goals for the LAC project. For instance, one group stated that one of their goals was to publicize information about the LAC, which is actually an objective, not a goal. Weaker objective and goal assignments also did not use clear language to describe their objectives. For instance, one group said that their objective was to "create monthly events" but the group did not clearly describe the nature of these events or how this objective/tactic would contribute to their goals.

Final Project
The final projects turned in and presented were approaching readiness to show the client, and the grade distribution was as follows: 23 As, 29 Bs, and 4Cs. Overall, I feel that the students appreciated the end result but not the process. It was confusing at times but in the end there were several projects that the Lawrence Arts Center considered to be exemplary and worth implementing. For an example of the project plans that the Lawrence Arts Council, in collaboration with the Lawrence Arts Center, are considering, please click here.

That being said, there were some consistent issues that arose in the less successful projects. For instance, some groups demonstrated challenges with clarifying and specifying the target audience; maintaining an alignment between their goals, objectives, and tactics; and identifying realistic tactics to meet those goals and objectives. Another issue that arose was the measurability of objectives—students identified objectives that were not measurable (e.g., the goal was to increase awareness, while the objective was motivational, rather than related to awareness).

The reoccurring issues for this assignment were the linkages between the objectives, goals and tactics. Most groups were able to make these linkages after two drafts for the Goals and Objectives Assignment; however, there were a few groups that did not quite achieve this learning objective, and it was reflected in their final project grade. I believe that additional time spent in class on this issue could have helped re-emphasize the difference between a goal and objective and how tactics are vehicles to carry these out. This is not an uncommon struggle for students to face, according to other professors who teach public relations courses and from the previous classes I have instructed. It is incumbent upon me, however, to implement a teaching strategy to help students make the connection before the final project. I believe that the following must take place: 1. Creating a space in which students will feel comfortable talking about the challenges of

distinguishing between public relations goals and objectives; 2. Allowing students to practice writing; and 3. Giving students an opportunity to apply their understanding of public relations in more than one setting (outside of the public relations project). These modifications to the course structure might also assist students who were confused between the stake and the message on the planning grid assignment. Allowing students more opportunities to apply knowledge would facilitate not only critical thinking but also applied learning in this situation.

Stronger Project Example
The Red 3 Group had the best presentation and one of the best final projects. This group's work exemplified a project that was client ready both for the presentation and final product (the public relations plan booklet). There were some minor issues that came up in the goals and objectives assignment; however, the group made an effort to strengthen this section in the final project. Below is the feedback that I provided to them about their project:

> *"Overall the public relations plan is far superior than any submitted this semester. The group really made an effort to go above and beyond what was required. There were only minor issues that I made note of in your plan. The executive summary, situation analysis and description of target audience/stakeholders were very strong, and it was evident that the group relied on secondary research. The goals, objectives and tactics section was also strong, but this is a section that I had some questions about. Some of the issues were providing tactics that had a stronger link to the objective that you proposed (an example is on page 11 where your group proposed to streamline Facebook presence into a cohesive LAC Fan page). This should be a tactic that carries out the goal to increase enrollment – at face value I can see how this may address the objective; however, the 4th tactic was the best in terms of helping the client to meet a motivational objective in this plan. Another issue was clarifying the tactics under goal 2. At first reading it was a little unclear why you were including goal 1 here, but I figured that your group was proposing the tactics. Remember who you are writing the plan for – this should be outlined to reduce any kind of confusion. Finally, some of the tactics such as the gala and other fundraising events may be too aggressive for an organization of this size. The plan shows creativity and also a synergy between some very creative thinkers."*

Weaker Project Example
This group's project was well written, and their situational analysis provided a strong review and application of the relevant research. However, there were also a number of weaknesses in this project plan. For instance, this group did not provide appropriate citations of the research in their plan, and their goals and objectives were not well aligned. The feedback that they received is provided below.

> *"Substantively, the plan has a lot of potential, and I'm sure that the client will be able to utilize this plan to create a strategy that will help achieve their goals. Let me discuss the various sections of the plan. The executive summary is well written, but I noticed that nothing was cited in this portion of the paper, or the entire plan for that matter. Your group did provide the sources; however, embedded citations or footnotes would have allowed me to quickly reference your sources. The situation analysis is superior to the other group public relations plans that I have graded thus far, and you should be commended. The research that was conducted is exemplary and also is evident in the public relations plan that you have proposed. The only issue here would be to condense*

it to the five pages that were requested and also make sure to edit for stylistic errors and grammar. One item that I did see was a mention of a radio remote or broadcast – these are not cheap. I address this also in the public relations plan. The stakeholders identified are excellent – I really appreciated the group taking the extra steps to describe the stakeholders so well. The client is able to quickly see why these stakeholders are important and most of all what "stake" they have in the organization and how they can help LAC reach its goals. The goals and objectives proposed are excellent; however, there is a disconnect between goals and objectives. I believe the confusion lies with wording essentially and making sure that you know what type of objective you have. Once you decide what type of objective you have, then you are able to provide tactics that will help meet the objective and also include measures that will help the organization see if those goals and objectives have been met. For instance, you state that goal 1 is to "increase awareness of the wide variety of affordable classes and programs at the LAC." It is ok to have a motivational AND an informational objective; however, your tactics and measures must flow from that. Under Objective 2 that states "Create an opportunity for potential and existing customers to learn about the courses offered," you have a tactic to "advertise" and this shouldn't be there. This tactic should be 1. a publicity objective to publicize events, etc. at the LAC or 2. another tactic that supports the stated objective which is to "create an opportunity to learn"; advertising may create a learning experience but for it to measurable – you would need for it to be an informational objective (how many people will see this – translates into awareness opportunity and AVE). Remember that motivational objectives have motivational tactics/measures and informational objectives have informational tactics/ measures. The only other issue I saw was with the timeline. Some of the suggested timelines to complete these tactics were aggressive while others were realistic. If the client receives this proposal in November or early December it would be inconceivable that some of these tactics would begin in January of next year."

Reflections

Overall, I felt that the class was successful, and many groups demonstrated an advanced understanding of public relations by the end of the semester. However, I also felt that students would have benefitted from a greater amount of practice and feedback across the semester, and I have several thoughts for how I will modify the course the next time that I teach it.

First, and probably most important, I plan to make the overall plan for the course, and the connections between the different pieces of the course and the goals, explicit and transparent to students, so that students understand why the steps that they are completing are important and how they build into the larger practice of "doing" public relations. The next time that I teach the class, I will talk more with students about how the skills that they are developing in this course fit into the larger curriculum and how these skills relate to the ability to be a more informed consumer of information. I also plan to provide increased guidance on the subcomponents of the project. For instance, I found that students had a difficult time translating the work that they did for their Research Memo into the Planning grid, even though I allowed resubmissions of the Planning Grid assignment. I would like to provide additional time for students to ask questions and work through this assignment in class.

Finally, while there was certainly variability in student performance, I would like to modify my current grading scheme to more richly capture that variability in understanding. I would like to expand my assessment of the project plans into a clear rubric that is based on a cognitive apprenticeship framework. A draft of the rubric I plan to use in future iterations of the course is located here. The use of this rubric will allow me to examine shifts in student performance and understanding across semesters, as I continue to modify this course and reflect on student learning outcomes.