Developing and teaching the crisis communication course

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Abstract

Comer (2010) noted the absence of literature offering guidance to instructors charged with developing standalone courses on crisis management. This article aims to fill this void, relating the author's experience in developing two crisis communication classes (one offered online, one in a traditional classroom setting). Drawing on 15 years of teaching experience (including single sessions devoted to crisis communication, reputation management, and related issues in public relations and business courses) plus the investigation of scholarly contributions related to the development of such courses, syllabi, and feedback from practitioners who develop and deliver related training, the article delivers the essential components of a standalone class (i.e., learning outcomes, texts, assignments) as a useful resource for others charged with delivering instruction in this area.

Introduction

Little has been written to guide instructors charged with crafting individual lessons, much less entire classes, on crisis management (Comer, 2010). My experience in developing instruction on a related topic, crisis communication, for various academic programmes at different universities highlighted this dearth of critical inquiry undertaken by scholars and professionals alike. Based on a review of existing resources and teaching experience over the past 15 years, two standalone classes on the topic were developed. The process and fruits of that labour are shared below.

Phase one: Teaching crisis communication in an MBA course on management communication

After teaching undergraduate public relations classes for several years, I was offered the opportunity to teach a course on management communication in an MBA programme. This required course aimed to provide "an advanced study of communication architectures and strategies for organizational decision-making and problem solving" (University of San Francisco, 2006, p. 1). Students were required to attend 10 of 12 two-hour sessions covering a range of topics. One session was devoted to communicating during crises, and was described as follows: "Learn to respond effectively to organisational crisis and change. Emphasis on identifying crisis scenarios for particular companies and industries" (University of San Francisco, 2006, p. 9). Required reading addressed how to identify potential crises in an organisation; plan for them; and divide crisis responsibilities to communicate with different stakeholders, among other topics. Those readings were supplemented with articles that addressed the emerging role of social media in crisis response. In short, the limited time devoted to the topic meant this instruction emphasised reactive communications and to a lesser extent the need to engage stakeholders in communication largely in isolation from the related topics of issue management and risk communication.

Student engagement in learning, typically referred as active learning, informed instructional design for this session and subsequent course development work in both traditional classroom and online settings described below. This emphasis, which reflects a longstanding strength of public relations pedagogy in general, rarely relies on lecture;

instead, students complete a variety of activities (some of which are discussed below) while primarily working together in small groups where they pursue common goals and are assessed individually (Barnes, Christiansen, & Hanson, 1994; Coombs & Rybacki, 1999; Prince, 2004). Related assessments, also described below, incorporate a range of methods used over time including those that called for actual performance on relevant tasks both during learning as well as after such activities were completed. In these instances, means of assessment were selected based on whether they were credible, useful, honest yet fair, intellectually rigorous and thought provoking, and feasible (Astin et al., 1996; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Wiggins, 1998).

More specifically, the lesson plan for this single communicating-during-crisis session featured a decision-focus case study which involved the death of two young girls due to the ingestion of a toxic substance found unexpectedly in a tube of toothpaste (Bell, 2006). This kind of case study is considered among educators to be the most popular used in courses, as it requires the reader to act (or decide) after reviewing the case. It appeared useful here for a related role-playing simulation, moreover, as it presented a real situation (without requiring any sort of computer program, technology, or physical equipment) incorporating significant business issues (related to product liability, supply chain management, and marketing, among others) that students could respond to behaviourally while challenging them to be creative (Armandi, Sherman, & Vega, 2004; Baglione, 2006; Brummel, Gunsalus, Anderson, & Loui, 2010; Ellet, 2007; Preston & Cottam, 1997; Salas, Wildman, & Piccolo, 2009).

Baglione (2006) identified three stages in role-playing activities: instructions, simulation, and debriefing. In this instance, students received instructions after being organised into small groups as they enable individuals to learn more of what is taught and retain it longer than when comparable material is presented in other instructional formats. The groups analysed the case from the perspective of different functional perspectives/roles, and whenever possible each student was assigned a role consistent with prior professional experience or education (e.g., students with undergraduate degrees in science were the scientists; students enrolled in the university's joint JD/MBA programme served as legal counsel). Additional instructions explained the overall simulation and assignment to prepare a brief presentation outlining what groups would do based on their particular roles, and also how the organisation should respond overall to the crisis. As students had varying degrees of prior knowledge related to their roles, attention was placed on providing a high degree of structure during the simulation itself so as to increase their learning. A debriefing after student presentations analysed the case and discussed nuances of student responses, while highlighting that the intent of the overall activity was not to produce the ultimate solution or 'right answer' but rather to challenge participants to reflect on issues raised (Brown, 1994; Davis, 2000; McKeachie, 1999).

In terms of the assignment, student responses varied in terms of their understanding of and experience in fulfilling the requirements of their particular roles. While the students in general appeared engaged in the activity, many nonetheless lacked sufficient knowledge to produce more than general responses to what professionals in their functional areas might have done. This represents one weakness of role-plays, which more advanced preparation by students (and, conversely, by the instructor) might have helped to alleviate (Brummel et al., 2010; Delpier, 2006). Some students also expressed frustration at the open-ended nature of the activity, and sought a tangible product or outcome from the simulation in a manner consistent with the findings of research conducted by Rippin, Booth, Bowie, and Jordan (2002) on using case studies in business education.

Nonetheless, this instance proved useful for instructional purposes as there were varied group conclusions regarding White 'N Brite's role in the girls' deaths and with that how the company might respond accordingly. Some

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student groups assumed the company was responsible and proposed actions consistent with that belief, including apologising; others denied any responsibility; some weren't sure yet also expressed sympathy for the victims. In all cases, students grappled with the need to develop and implement an appropriate and timely response while at the same time failing to grasp the importance of what appeared to them to be peripheral issues (e.g., unionisation). Such developments pointed out some shortcoming of the reactive communications emphasis, a consequence of limited prior instructor professional experience and unfamiliarity with relevant literature; a short time frame devoted to the activity within the course; and the need for vulnerabilities assessment in advance of the onset of crisis and efforts to foster two-way and symmetrical communication with internal and external publics (Grunig, 2009).

As this course on management communication was taught between 2006 and 2011, the original framework based on selective attendance at 10 sessions was modified as it resulted in what seemed like a series of disconnected workshops. Instead, the course focused on strategic communication based on cumulative acquisition and practice of skills throughout 12 required sessions. Crisis communication became the focus of the final course meeting, thus allowing framing of the subject in three ways: first, as the culmination of the material covered during the course, with an explicit reference to Argenti, Howell, and Beck's (2005) integrated strategic approach to communication as practiced by Dell, FedEx, and others; second, as a broader management function than implied by the management communication focus; and, third, as explained below, to make explicit relationships between course content and concepts students encountered in other MBA courses. The latter two frames offered the opportunity to move beyond the primary focus on reactive communications to consider crisis management (i.e., how organisations manage their responses to crises that often were avoidable) as a process within a broader

continuum of management actions and worthy of exploration by graduate business students (Jaques, 2010).

To these ends, the White 'N Brite case (2006) was supplemented with discussion of illustrative cases on crisis management as exemplars of either ideal or worst types of behaviours in this arena (Armandi, Sherman, & Vega, 2004). These included Tylenol recalls in 1982 and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 (Harrald, Cohn, & Wallace, 1992; Pauly & Hutchison, 2005). Other crises deemed significant or noteworthy were covered as well, including but not limited to, the Bhopal disaster in 1984 (Eckerman, 2005); the Odwalla juice contamination crisis in 1996, when the existence of E. coli in the California company's product caused one death and more than 60 cases of illness in the U.S. (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998); the Bridgestone-Firestone tyre recall in 2000 (Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002); Hurricane Katrina, the costliest natural disaster in the history of the U.S. (Hurricane Katrina, 2013; see also Gheytanchi, Joseph, Gierlach, Kimpara, & Housley, 2007; Liu, 2007; Sobel & Leeson, 2006); the Mattel toy recall in 2007 (Choi & Lin, 2009); the Toyota brake safety scandal in 2009 (Andrews, Simon, Tian, & Zhao, 2011); the BP oil spill in 2010 (Harlow, Brantley, & Harlow, 2011); and the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal that began in the 1980s (Barth, 2010). Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer's (1998) definition of an organisational crisis as "specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high priority goals" (p. 233) informed discussion of these and other crises selected for student analysis, in-class discussion, and written assignments.

In addition, connections between this study of crisis communication and organisational behaviour topics such as individual behaviour and processes, decision making, team dynamics, leadership, culture, and change were made explicit as students had or were concurrently exploring such topics in other required MBA classes. The session design thus attempted to balance institutional calls for a

more integrated core curriculum based on coverage of cases and topics across individual courses with perspectives shared in the literature on crisis management that consider the subject outside the traditional domain of communication and public relations and thus which were deemed to be better suited to students seeking graduate degrees in management (James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011; Roberts & Bea, 2001). Despite such efforts, the discussion of crises within an organisational behaviour framework remained at best limited in this course as the complex interplay of organisational culture, managerial cognition, and myriad crisis types (see Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007) necessarily remained largely unexplored given limited time, meaning the emphasis of instruction remained on the communication reaction to crisis. Perhaps a case study highlighting one instance of this interplay might be included in future versions of this course, in conjunction with concurrent instruction in other required classes exploring organisational behaviour, leadership, and related topics.

Assignments in this revised class included analytical papers exploring one of the aforementioned crises; group panel presentations, where students answered questions probing the origins of this particular crisis and assessing the organisation's response; and students role-playing as spokespersons for those same organisations facing specific crises. In the latter exercise, students responded to questions posed to them while the instructor played the role of a news reporter. These interviews were taped and replayed in class, and feedback was provided based on criteria that had been developed by the instructor on effective spokesperson skills (Appendix A). These assignments collectively were deemed most conducive to assess relevant functional knowledge for MBA students who completed the course, and also encouraged peer feedback and the cultivation of cooperative skills by having students work in teams (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

As part of an assessment of this communicating-during-crisis unit undertaken with an eye towards future improvement of the overall course, students were queried to gain insight on what they had learned and the value of the aforementioned assignments. An email was sent to a random sample of students who had completed this course in the fall of 2010 to gain their insight on what they had learned and to assess overall experience of instruction. This input was solicited by email, with questions posed to the five students who volunteered to participate by responding affirmatively to the original inquiry. In turn, each student was assured in writing that their remarks would remain anonymous by assigning a pseudonym to their responses (Appendix B).

Some respondents cited insight gained into the relationship between crisis management and organisational success as especially valuable. Karen Shadrach commented, "I learned that how a business handles negative incidences is the true test of the character. If handled poorly, they could ruin a business. If handled well, you can turn lemons into lemonade by gaining more trust with the public and customers" (K. Shadrach, personal communication, August 11, 2011). Her classmate, Peter Jackman, was even more specific about the importance of reputation management:

> [which] is something that we as MBA students continue to learn about every day in marketing, international business, organizational development, and finance classes ... it takes an entire company of individuals to make the best of plans successful. A company may very well have the face of the CEO, but it must have departments and individuals committed to a plan behind the scenes to make it successful (P. Jackman, personal correspondence, August 11, 2011).

While generally citing the appeal of varied assignments (without referring specifically to the role-play simulation), some students considered the opportunity to compare different crises and corresponding organisational responses through the different assignments as most valuable. A greater focus on tactics was the second most popular suggestion for improvement, as one student noted: "It would

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have been helpful to know how to put out a press release or other communication. Diving a little deeper into actual communications to analyse words would have also been interesting as well as seeing interview footage and discussing body language, delivery, and credibility" (K. Shadrach, personal communication, August 11, 2011).

This feedback proved valuable and timely, as it highlighted the benefits of an active learning approach based on varied assignments and group work consistent with main points in the literature. Combined with the experience in teaching the course on management communication, concurrent doctoral work in organisation and leadership, and understanding of effective pedagogy, it prepared me for the next phase of teaching crisis communication.

Phase two: Teaching a standalone crisis communication course in an online Masters of Science degree programme in integrated marketing communication

The next phase in the evolution of my experience as a teacher of crisis communication courses occurred during the first half of 2011, when an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) graduate programme hired me to develop a nine-week course on the topic. In this exclusively online programme, students complete entirely asynchronous courses - no on-campus attendance is required. Graduates earn either a M.S. (masters of science) degree in IMC or one of two graduate certificates (in IMC or digital marketing communication).

This new elective course was initially offered in late 2011 and represented the third public relations-focused class in the curriculum. Representatives of Public Relations Society of America, the world's largest organisation of public relations professionals, had suggested the course topic (School programme representative, personal communication, July 14, 2011).

Having never designed or taught an entire course devoted to crisis communication, I determined that I needed to explore what had

been written about teaching the course, gather and review syllabi from similar courses, and speak with professionals in the field. The melding of insight gained from these sources, together with the information and insight that had been gained previously, would inform efforts to develop a standalone online course on the subject.

Sources of information for developing the crisis communication course

Scholarly and trade publications
Coombs (2001) offered the most substantive and comprehensive guidance for teaching what he referred to as a crisis management course, which he based on nine objectives. The first was to present the concept of crisis management in terms of distinct phases of progress (pre-crisis, crisis event, and post-crisis); second, to understand key concepts, including building a crisis-sensing effort based on issues management, risk management, and relationship management; third, to select crisis team members; fourth, to cultivate the ability to diagnose crisis vulnerabilities; fifth, to differentiate different crisis types; sixth, to demonstrate effective spokesperson skills; seventh, to construct a crisis management plan; eighth, to assess the appropriateness of a crisis response; and ninth, to assess information needs and resources of a crisis situation.

Coombs outlined assessment tools to evaluate student acquisition of skills associated with achieving each objective. His first exam tested understanding of fundamental course concepts, a memorisation-related activity. The final exam required students to assess a crisis and recommend actions. The first of three papers involved an assessment of an organisation's crisis vulnerabilities and types; a second required students to assess a crisis situation including media coverage of it; and a third was the development of a crisis management plan for the same organisation used in the crisis vulnerability assessment. The final exam and papers together, which in their emphasis on analysing crises echoed a main focus of assignments in the single communicating-during-crisis session, allowed for deeper learning, enabling students to consult

more sources and by acquiring a deeper knowledge base synthesise key points in the course more effectively. The increasingly complex nature of the assignments, moreover, permitted the instructor to offer comments and suggestions for improvement before the final longer plan was developed as well as to determine if individual students needed additional assistance in writing (Biggs, 2011; Davis, 2000).

Finally, Coombs offered four pieces of advice to individuals teaching crisis management courses. First, employ techniques to foster active learning and the cultivation of students' analytical skills. Second, focus on theory and principles rather than case analysis and 'to do' lists characteristic of much crisis communications-related advice. Third, cultivate a broad perspective on crisis management that extends beyond the domain of public relations. Finally, use current events in classroom discussion and written assignments whenever possible.

Coombs provided a call to action in terms of framing the study of crisis management outside the public relations realm, but failed to offer clear guidelines for incorporating organisational behaviour concepts into either course content or assignments. The role of the Internet and social media in particular also largely were precluded from consideration in light of his article's publication date.

Other contributions add to Coombs' framework, providing insight into how to incorporate management considerations into the crisis communication course. Looking to one aspect of crisis management education, Cirka and Corrigall (2009) focused on the development of skills in anticipating potential crises. They developed an exercise based on the use of metaphor to spur creative thinking while helping students to overcome inevitable cognitive biases that make it difficult to see beyond successes and failures. When employed, this technique helped students appreciate how cognitive biases limit managers' ability to think realistically about the future; develop skills in using metaphor as a tool to overcome cognitive biases;

understand the benefits of proactively managing an expanded set of crisis possibilities; and gain experience in formulating a crisis management plan.

Heffernan (2011) provided further insight into cognitive biases (of both psychological and cultural origins) and their influence on crisis management planning. Tendencies for individuals to seek the familiar; focus on what works, not what is wrong; to fall in love with an idea; and to follow orders, among others, combined with other characteristics of organisational culture, reduce the likelihood of substantive conversation about potential threats and the development of plans to address them.

Finally, several articles explored the use of simulations and role-playing activities for pedagogical purposes in related courses. Shifflet and Brown (2006) explored the application of a computer-based simulation in conjunction with instruction on a crisis communication case study, focusing on how the overall class context shaped student use of the technology in pursuit of learning objectives. Baglione (2006) used a case study role-playing technique in teaching introductory graduate marketing and international marketing classes. Conducted over two 50-minute classes, Baglione's students received a case study outlining a situation to analyse before responding to a reporter. The activity was further divided into two exercises, the telephone conversation and a press conference. Baglione role-played the reporter and interacted with students throughout their participation, ultimately shifting the discussion to crisis preparation once the role-playing activity had been completed in a fashion similar to what was employed in the communicating-during-crisis session of the MBA course. His students believed the exercise increased their learning, and fostered the development of skills, creativity, and confidence necessary for crisis management seemingly consistent with criteria Brown (1994) identified as essential for effectiveness in role-plays (which likewise were apparent during the role-play simulation described above): sufficient detail to challenge and engage; an underlying problem to be addressed; and an appeal to imagination.

In reviewing past instruction, I saw how I had addressed at least in passing most of Coombs' (2001) main objectives by including active learning exercises and offering hints of a broader theoretical and practical framework for crisis management. I also had attempted to plan and conduct a simulation integrated into the course based on guidance offered in the literature, although efforts were limited given minimal prior exposure to crisis management, the time that realistically could be allotted to the activity during the single session, and perhaps most importantly, a vague sense of specific, anticipated learning outcomes from the activity and how they might relate to broader objectives for the lesson as a whole. Subsequent review also highlighted the superficial treatment of crisis prevention, planning, and response phases and related individual and organisational barriers, as well as the design of other assignments. The vision for a standalone course on crisis communication that better employed active learning opportunities and incorporated a crisis management perspective was now clearer.

Course syllabi
Using the advanced search capabilities offered by Google, "crisis communications", "crisis management", "reputation management", "risk communications", and "syllabus" were entered into search fields to identify syllabi for classes on these topics. This effort yielded syllabi for myriad courses, 13 of which were selected for review based primarily on the comprehensiveness in terms of course goals, topics, readings, and assignments. Three courses were identified as public relations; four were considered communications; and three were identified as business classes. Two other courses were part of specialised academic programmes (e.g., biosecurity, public health). One syllabus was for an online course.

Eight of the 13 courses identified Fearn-Banks (various editions) as the primary textbook; one also required students to purchase the workbook (Fearn-Banks, 2011b) that accompanied this text. McKeachie (1999)

argued that there is no substitute for detailed review of the competing texts for courses to be developed, so works by Fearn-Banks and others cited in syllabi were secured and reviewed.

While syllabi varied in terms of the level of detail, much less in terms of their conformity to criteria laid out by Davis (2000) and McKeachie (1999), instructors in general called on a combination of theory presentation, case studies, plan development, and interactive exercises that represented a far more comprehensive approach to crisis communication and management than previous courses had offered and generally echoed guidance offered by Coombs (2001). The review and analysis of these syllabi thus was helpful in efforts to identify/develop a description for my class; learning outcomes; suitable readings; and assignments.

Professional practice
As I've learned a lot from colleagues outside academia about developing and delivering content to students, I decided to query them regarding their experiences. I turned to LinkedIn, the world's largest professional network on the Internet ("About us," 2011) and found its crisis communication group, which consisted of over 4,400 professionals interested in crisis communications as a subset of public relations that helps individuals, companies, or organisations facing challenges to their reputation, to be an ideal source. A relevant discussion question was identified, as follows: "Anyone have ideas for hands-on 'exercises' with a group of 'students' learning about media/crisis communications?" Many responses focused on media relations and spokesperson participation in crisis communication, suggesting that mock interviews were especially useful for practice, reflection, and learning. Several individuals mentioned the discussion of scenarios and/or case studies, particularly those relevant to participants' industries; some used role-playing, with participants assuming roles of reporter, organisational representative, and aggrieved third party, for example. These thoughts largely reflected my thinking, previous experience in teaching the subject, and relevant literature on

role-playing and scenario-based teaching and learning cited above.

Sydney, Australia-based communications consultant Daniel Barty presented a crisis scenario in stages to mimic developments participants likely would encounter. His approach offered insight into how the White 'N Brite role-play simulation (Bell, 2006) could be better presented:

> I try to work with a scenario they could face and then run it through in 3 stages. 1. Start the crisis scenario at a fairly straightforward level, letting them get comfortable, work through what they've been taught and get on top of the problem. 2. Add some variables to make it tougher, along the lines of what was being expected to resolve the crisis failed and the situation has taken some turn for the worse. Again let them work through it, modify plans, respond and get on top of it 3. Add a tough, high-level problem e.g., political or public anger over perceived agency failing/an operational response/staff misappropriation of resources, and let them get on top again. The feedback I've had from students is that at the end they understand how a scenario can unravel in real time and also realise they are more confident and less likely to panic (D. Barty, personal correspondence, July 21, 2011).

Practitioner comments overall echoed main points in the literature regarding the need for active learning, relevant examples, and discussion and reflection. The focus of many comments on media relations and spokesperson activities, while consistent with Coombs's (2001) objectives, nonetheless belied a crisis communication as opposed to a crisis management orientation.

The online course

The syllabus for a standalone online crisis communication course was developed between March and June 2011. Having taught online previously for the same academic programme at the university, I was familiar with its overall orientation less on the acquisition of information or content through its instruction and more on its application in real world settings whenever possible, which resonated with the emphasis in literature on online course development (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). More specifically, the required course-planning framework was grounded in characteristics of adult learners and how they could be translated into the design of online learning. These included providing regular, consistent communication; challenging students to synthesise and solve problems; providing multiple resources of information including differing viewpoints; acknowledging accumulated experiences of participants as valuable; using hyperlinks to allow students to develop their own path; allowing learner choice of assignments, projects, or research topics; encouraging students to post responses to questions; and beginning the class with student introductions, among others (Cercone, 2008). Group projects, role-playing, case studies, and simulations were included in this list, yet the academic programme discouraged group work given the geographic diversity (and corresponding times differences) among students. For similar reasons, a real-time or even asynchronous simulation during the course proved impractical based on prior experience.

These two differences aside, course development proceeded using the academic programme's standard template which largely mirrored recommendations in the literature cited above: nine written lectures (which drew on multiple resources and included numerous hyperlinks); one weekly question for the asynchronous discussions, which play a central role in online instruction (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2005); and, following guidance offered by Davis (2000) cited above, four short and two long written assignments. Students had some flexibility in choosing the focus of the latter two assignments, which were due during the final two sessions of the course.

Drawing largely on the syllabi from other classes, Coombs (2001), and guidance offered by Biggs and Tang (2007) and McKeachie

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(1999), learning outcomes were developed for this course (Appendix C). These outcomes informed the objectives for each of the nine lessons, which in turn enabled readings to be assigned; a 2,000-word lecture to be crafted that summarised reading and included references to current events, articles, insight, and experience related to marketing, public relations, and organisational behaviour in general; the development of a question to be answered on the discussion board; and other assignments to be created.

The online IMC programme typically required students to read two or three main texts. The first choice was Fearn-Banks (2011a) given its popularity among other instructors; focus on district crisis phases; its rich variety of case studies; and in particular the determination that students would enjoy reading it (McKeachie, 1999). Yet the work by itself did not provide the crisis management theoretical framework deemed critical. Works cited in syllabi and other research were reviewed before finally settling on Coombs (2012) as its focus on crisis management grounded in an exploration of crisis prevention, preparation, recognition, and response phases complemented Fearn-Banks and in conjunction with that work delivered the desired conceptual and theoretical framework deemed optimal for instruction.

Coombs (2012) was used to shape the focus of lessons one through four, with the structure of Fearn-Banks (2011a) called on to identify major topics for lessons five through nine. Readings from these two books were supplemented with scholarly articles on topics deemed critical and which did not appear to be adequately covered. Appendix D presents the schedule of topics and corresponding reading assignments. Fearn-Banks's (2011b) workbook that accompanied her text was used to develop weekly discussion questions (Appendix E) and the four shorter written assignments (Appendix F).

The first of two major written assignments involved a case study analysis, along the lines of what had been required in previous courses and what other instructors used in syllabi that were reviewed. After soliciting student preferences, each was assigned to a crisis that they would analyse and present to the class much like had been done in the MBA course on management communication. During week 7, Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill would be covered; during week 8, students would address the Toyota vehicle and Mattel toy recalls; and during week 9, the Bhopal disaster and the Catholic Church sex abuse scandals would be the subjects. For the written component of this assignment, student would prepare a 1,500 to 2,000-word analytical essay based on responses to a series of questions (Appendix G). The research in total informed the development of these questions, and overall they were far more comprehensive in intent than those that had been posed to student groups in the management communication course.

The second major course assignment required students to develop a crisis communication plan for their employer or a non-profit organisation of their choice. Several syllabi included this assignment, and Coombs (2001) did as well. Fearn-Banks (2011a) provided several examples that were supplemented with links to others. The ultimate purpose of this assignment was to produce a document that students could present to their employer or another organisation as an actual plan that could be utilised in time of crisis, as well as to challenge them to apply course material.

Given the inability to identify a simulation that might work in within the parameters established for this online course (i.e., no team assignments), such an activity was not included in this iteration. There thus was no opportunity to revisit prior experience with White 'N Brite (Bell, 2006) or an alternative role-play simulation. The programme's managers seemed open to incorporate such an activity when the class is next revised, with the most suitable being one offered by Ko and Rossen (2004). It involves the assigning of roles to individual students with each making a presentation available to classmates at any point during a designated time frame for the assignment.

Phase three: Developing a traditional classroom course

Based on efforts in putting together the course on crisis communication for the IMC programme, I was offered the opportunity to teach a one-unit elective course on the same topic for an MBA programme in 2011. Scheduled over two five-hour weekend days, the class allowed me to apply what had been learned in developing the online class while creating a comparable educational experience in a traditional classroom setting.

The course was to include 10 hours of face time and thus was more limited in terms of reading and assignments than the online course. Yet the real-time format provided the opportunity to apply lessons learned during previous teaching experience related to active learning and, in particular, what had been discovered during research related to developing and conducting classroom simulations.

Students were required to read Fearn-Banks (2011a) and the same articles that had been assigned as part of the IMC programme course. Rather than assign the material from Coombs (2012), it was incorporated into presentations. In-class activities and written assignments drew on students' understanding of this body of knowledge, with discussion board questions and shorter written assignments from the online course adapted for use here. The overall structure for the course remained similar to the online version (i.e., crisis communications overview, crisis prevention, crisis planning and preparation, and crisis response, social media, rumours and crisis communications on day one; case studies and the simulation on day two).

By scheduling the case studies at the end of the second day of the course, they were envisioned as one of two culminating assignments as they often may be used in instruction to address the whole syllabus so long as relevant content areas are represented and sequenced appropriately as was the case in this course (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In addition, the White 'N Brite case (Bell, 2006) was employed as a case study/role-play simulation given comfort with it although the

restricted time frame in the course prevented the kind of facilitation outlined by Barty (see above). The simulation facilitation plan and questions (Appendix H) nonetheless were designed to elicit a discussion of crisis management within organisational behaviour, leadership, management communication, and public relations contexts, consistent with the importance attached to these arenas for understanding the discipline (Cirka & Corrigall, 2009; Heffernan, 2011; Preston & Cottam, 1997; Wooten & Hayes, 2008).

Reflections on future teaching of crisis communication

Laufer (2010) noted that crisis management is a multidisciplinary area related to marketing, public relations, communications, and management. Optimally, courses ought to draw on the talents of faculty with expertise in these areas; at the very least, individual faculty teaching such courses need to at least be familiar with core concepts lest students' crisis management perspectives remain limited to crisis response (i.e., communication) strategies.

The realities related to teaching the course, particularly its orientation towards crisis communication, made it incumbent on me alone to cultivate this broader perspective and communicate it to students. The research completed to help me develop the two courses described above, plus professional experience and change in mind-set informed by the study of organisational behaviour and leadership, enabled me to make at what I believed was at least a satisfactory initial effort in this regard.

The evaluations and informal student observations received during the five occasions when I taught the class from 2011 to the present seems to have validated general beliefs about the success of the fundamental course design. Yet such feedback failed to probe the value of specific learning activities (especially the role-play simulation) in meeting course objectives and stimulating student learning. Brummel et al. (2010) noted comparable challenges related to what students actually learned in their study of using role-play simulations in teaching responsible research, thus suggesting further

inquiry is warranted to clarify their overall value in teaching crisis communication.

Finally, the increasing attention paid to social media and online crises suggests that future iterations of the course would benefit from increased emphasis in this area. Case studies and potentially new role-play simulations seem warranted, especially to the extent that they can replicate the unique challenges of the medium in traditional classroom and online formats.

These two areas (informed by the deepening of the personal knowledge base on crisis management) seem to offer the greatest challenges ahead in terms of building on existing research and practice on the teaching of crisis communication. The hope is that such efforts will be furthered by connections with other instructors equally enthusiastic about pursuing effective pedagogy, a vital topic for public relations and graduate business students as well as aspiring leaders working in all organisations.

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Appendix A: How to handle media interviews

Here's a set of guidelines to help you make the most of opportunities you have to speak to reporters.

1. Have a game plan. It is critical to be responsive to the reporter's need for information, but make sure you know what story you want to communicate and then do so. Here's how. When you answer a question, reply briefly and directly with an answer. Then, if it will help, add a point or points, preferably based on your main message or supporting messages.

2. State your most important fact at the beginning of your answer to a question. We remember most clearly the first thing that is said, not the last. The reporter will include the most important fact first in relaying your answer to a question, so if it is at the end it may be chopped off during the editing process.

3. If a question is framed negatively, do not repeat the questioner's words but instead respond with positive or neutral words in your answer. You don't want to be quoted confirming or denying a negative statement but rather making an affirmative statement that reflects well on your organisation. For example, if you're asked a question along the lines "Are you saying that you are not going to (fill in the blank)?" respond with "We are carefully considering a variety of options to address the problem you mentioned, and will be happy to let you know what we decide" – as opposed to "Yes, we are not going to…" or "No, we are not going to…."

4. Do not comment on the competition. You don't work for them and aren't obligated to draw attention to their efforts. Moreover, you simply don't have the knowledge to offer expert comment on what they're doing.

5. Recognise the reporter is not your friend. He or she represents the readers, viewers, or listeners, depending on the medium involved. It is not a reporter's job to write a good story about your organisation, in other words. So it is worthwhile to maintain a formal tone when answering questions, as well as before and after the 'official' interview when a reporter may engage you informally in an attempt to get you to say something that's quotable but which may not reflect well on you or your organisation.

6. Be brief and to the point, while striving to be original and strong. Use colourful metaphors and language to discuss your subject, as opposed to tiresome clichés and jargon.

7. Answer questions in a way that is appropriate for the reporter and his/her audience. Reporters at trade publications are interested in technical details, to meet the needs of a knowledgeable 'insider' audience. On the other hand, someone writing for a general business or consumer publication, as well as television and radio journalists, may not be as curious about the minutiae of a product but instead want a clear sense of its relevance to their 'lay' audience.

8. Realise anything you say can find its way into the reporter's story. Assume there's no such thing as going 'off the record' during an interview.

9. Don't guess at answers when you don't have details, or if you don't know.

10. If you don't want to discuss a subject, or feel it lies outside of your area of   expertise, then say so. If you don't know the answer to a question, say you don't know but offer to find out (if you can and want to do so).

11. Don't say "no comment".

12. Don't argue with the reporter or lose your cool, either during the interview or afterward.

13. Take your time. If a question is unclear, ask for clarification.

14. Tell the truth and avoid exaggeration at all costs.

Appendix B: Questions for students about crisis communications and reputation management unit in the management communication course

I'm writing a journal article on teaching crisis communications and reputation management. A section of my article will discuss my experience in teaching the management communication class you took as part of your programme, more specifically the session where we discussed these topics. I am seeking comments from some students in those classes to include in my article, and to that end I present the questions below that I'd appreciate you taking the time to answer.

Feel free to incorporate your responses directly below the appropriate question, and return this entire document to me by email by no later than Friday August 12.

Please note that your participation is entirely optional, and you can choose to answer any or all of the questions. You will be referred to by a pseudonym (in addition to mentioning that you are or were an MBA student) should I choose to include one or more of your comments in my article.

Let me know if you have questions. Thank you for your help!

1.   What content, assignments, and/or activities do you recall from the crisis communications and reputation management unit included in the management communication course you completed as part of your MBA programme?

2.   Discuss the value of each of these components of the educational experience you identified in your previous answer in terms of helping you to learn about crisis communications and reputation management. What specifically helped you learn? What might have been done more effectively? What other types of learning activities might have been included in the unit to help you learn?

3.   What did you learn about crisis communications and reputation management from the management communication course?

4.   How, if at all, did what you learn about crisis communications and reputation management come into play in subsequent MBA courses you completed?

5.   How, if at all, has what you learned about crisis communications and reputation management come into play in any workplace experiences (i.e., internships, jobs, volunteering) you had after finishing the course?

6.   Please indicate anything else you would like to share about the unit on crisis communications and reputation management that has not been covered in your responses to the previous questions.

7.   If necessary, would you be willing to speak with the instructor by phone should he need further information on any of your responses to the previous questions? (If you answer yes, the instructor will be in touch to set up an interview should he feel it is necessary).

8.   Briefly describe your professional experience prior to and during your completion of the your MBA programme. Also, please mention your undergraduate major.

Thanks again for your participation!

Appendix C: Crisis communications course learning outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Identify and apply crisis prevention strategies to different situations in various industries;
- Isolate and describe crisis planning and preparation measures;
- Differentiate between different crisis types;
- Assess the appropriateness of a crisis response;
- Assess the information needs and resources of a crisis situation;
- Identify and assess the application of social media tools in different stages of crisis communications and reputation management;
- Critically analyse previous crisis situations in established organisations; and
- Create a crisis communication plan for an organisation.

Appendix D: Crisis communications course

Schedule of weekly topics and assigned readings for nine-week online course

_____

Session	Topic	Readings
1	Crisis communications overview	Fearn-Banks (1, 2); Coombs (1); Hearit & Brown (2004)
2	Crisis prevention & communications	Fearn-Banks (3); Coombs (3,4); Roberts & Bea (2001)
3	Crisis preparation and planning	Fearn-Banks (15; Appendices A-C); Coombs (5,6); Cloudman & Hallahan (2009); Trump (2009)
4	Crisis response	Fearn-Banks (4); Coombs (8); Martinelli & Briggs (1998)
5	Social media, rumours, and crisis communications	Fearn-Banks (5,6); Coombs (2)

Appendix E: Weekly discussion questions for online crisis communications course

Week 1
In apologia theory, how can an organisation respond apologetically without admitting guilt? Cite at least two examples in your response, and compare/contrast different approaches. While you may draw on examples included in the readings and material presented in lesson one, you are encouraged to incorporate other examples you identify based on professional experience or your review of outside resources (including those identified in the lesson).

Week 2
What role does communication play in crisis prevention efforts discussed in this lesson? Cite and describe at least two examples from the assigned reading, lesson (including links to relevant articles), or personal experience (including from the organisation where you work and/or the organisation for which you will be developing a crisis communications plan).

Week 3
Identify at least two of the vulnerabilities faced by the organisation for which you are developing a crisis communications plan. Assess the likelihood/relative importance of each threat using the information provided in Fearn-Banks (p. 303), and discuss generally how your plan will be developed to respond to them.

Week 4
You work for Jamooga, a baby food company. In the same month, there are reports of pieces of glass appearing in products produced by both Jamooga and Barnusta, your competitor. An internal investigation and an investigation by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration can find no glass contamination at your facilities. Management strongly suspects product tampering. Reports of glass in Barnusta products appeared a week before reports of glass in Jamooga's. It could be people trying to cash in on the product scare; in other words, they put the glass in hoping to get money from Jamooga. Barnusta has just announced a product recall related to the glass. What do you recommend Jamooga do, and why?

Week 5
Government agencies in the U.S., such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and many companies must have communications approved by various levels of authorities before release by social or traditional media. This takes time. Should they decrease or eliminate this approval process, release the best information possible, no matter how vague, and expand or correct it later? What are the pros and cons or early release versus later release?

Week 6
Who or what, in your opinion, was most responsible for the Exxon Valdez oil spill?

Week 7
Compare and contrast the responses of BP to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico with that of the U.S. federal government to Hurricane Katrina. What crisis communications and reputation management efforts were effective? Which were not? Why? What lessons did you learn as far as how organisations faced with these types of crisis might best respond to the specifics of the situation and in particular the broader challenges they raised?

Week 8

Compare and contrast the responses of Toyota and Mattel to the product crises they faced. What crisis communications and reputation management efforts were effective? Which were not? Why? What lessons did you learn here, as well as from other classes you've completed in this programme, as far as how an organisation faced with the prospect of recalling a product might best respond to the challenges raised?

Week 9
"This is a basic crisis communications principle: When you are dealing in a crisis situation, people want to look, see and feel that some type of leadership is being projected."
Chris Lehane, political consultant and crisis communications expert.

"Approach with a human face is the basic part of crisis communications."
Kathleen Fearn-Banks, *Crisis communications: A casebook approach*, p. 243.

Do you agree or disagree with these quotes? Why? How is each relevant to the crises we studied in conjunction with this lesson (Bhopal, Catholic Church, individuals in scandal and crisis)?

Appendix F: Five shorter written assignments for online crisis communications course

Due Week 2

Evaluate the pre-crisis relationships at the organisation you have selected to complete your crisis communications plan (due week 9). Consider all types, including management-employee, management-news media and social media, management-lawyer, management-customer/client, and any others deemed relevant to your organisation. Identify what strategies, if any, have been employed to foster productive relationships. Assess the soundness of each relationship.

Due Week 3

Assume you've completed the development of the crisis communications plan for this course, and that you've been invited to present it to senior management with the goal of ensuring its adoption (and their participation). What obstacles or other difficulties do you expect to encounter? What aspects of the plan would you emphasise in your presentation? What rationale would you offer to your audience to persuade them to adopt your plan?

Due Week 4

Based on your reading of the Odwalla article and any additional research on that crisis that you conduct, assess the company's response based on materials covered in the readings and class lecture. Was it effective? Why or why not? What strategy or strategies did the company employ? What was the organisational philosophy, if any, that inspired this approach to resolving the crisis?

Due Week 5

Find a rogue website on the Internet and describe your response to it. Write a response that could be printed in a newspaper, circulated via email, posted on a website, or published via other social media. Which method of responding would be most effective and why?

Due Week 6

Discuss how the crisis communications theories covered in lesson one apply to the Tylenol crisis discussed in chapter 7 of Fearn-Banks.

Appendix G: Written questions for final case assignment in online and traditional classroom crisis communications course

* What happened that prompted the crisis you've selected? Provide a brief overview of the chain of events that precipitated the crisis, what happened during it, and how it concluded (which may consist of an update on most recent crisis-related developments).

* How were the crisis communications theories covered in the course reflected in the particular crisis?

* Can you identify the five stages of a crisis outlined in the course? Please describe each stage in relation to the crisis you have selected for analysis.

* What issues, reputation, and/or risk management efforts, if any, did the organisation(s) pursue by way of crisis prevention? How did the crisis itself highlight strengths or limitations of these efforts (or the absence of them)?

* Assess the response of the organisation to the specific crisis you're considering. What tools (e.g., social media) and techniques were used? Which of these tools/techniques were effective in terms of the overall crisis communication and reputation management efforts? Why?

* How did crisis response tools and techniques employed in your case study come up short? Why? What might the organisation you studied have done instead?

* In your opinion, what distinguishes this crisis from others we have discussed in class? What makes it like them?

* What about this crisis in particular informs your overall understanding of crisis communication and reputation management?

Students in the online version of the course also had to complete a crisis management plan, and thus for this assignment they had to answer two additional questions:

* What did you learn from your work on this crisis that helped you when preparing the crisis communications plan for your organisation?

* What did you learn while preparing the crisis communications plan for your organisation that helped you when analysing this crisis?

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Appendix H: Plan for facilitating White 'N Brite case study in traditional classroom setting

1. Students receive case study in class. Instructions presented orally, in abbreviated format, immediately after case distributed.

2. Students assigned to groups to prepare presentations. In advance, instructor reviews individual student backgrounds to match experience/experience with appropriate functional areas.

3. Students given time to prepare presentations. Time allotted will vary depending on length of class session, other subjects that need to be addressed, and size of class, among other possible variables.

4. Students deliver presentations, the length of which will vary depending on same variables identified in item 3.

5. After conclusion of presentations, instructor distributes the following questions for each individual and/or group to consider based on their presentations and those made by other student groups:

   a. Assume each member of the class is given the opportunity to play the role of Richard Wendt, CEO of White 'N Brite. Based on the presentations you've just heard, what would you do? Why? What aptitudes and skills should a crisis leader possess?

   b. How does White 'N Brite prevent another incident like this one from occurring?

   c. How can White 'N Brite prepare itself for the future structurally, internally, externally, and competitively?

   d. How did group dynamics play a role in the formulation of your response?

   e. What about your participation in this simulation informs your overall understanding of crisis communication and reputation management?