
Teaching strategic communication in precarious times: First-hand insights into a digital, global learning experience

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical insight into the learning outcomes of a global, real-life, client-based communication project and its role in preparing future strategic communicators for the challenges presented in their prospective work environments, which are assumed to be shaped by an increasing level of diversity on one hand, and reliance on digital technologies on the other. This longitudinal study draws on first-hand reflections of participants from 12 countries. Despite the overwhelmingly positive nature of the project feedback, findings indicate that participating students may underestimate the long-term benefits of this global learning experience and its impact on their future roles as strategic communication professionals and – potentially – industry leaders, especially in relation to personal networks, (virtual) teamwork skills, technological abilities, conflict resolution and diplomacy. The authors conclude that experiences such as participation in this project enable today's graduates to establish their personal career narrative and move beyond what has been labelled the Precariat, which is defined as an emerging class of people who face life and in particular job insecurities and hence limited career prospects.

Introduction

Over the past decades, public relations scholars have emphasised the importance of cross-cultural awareness in public relations practice and scholarship (see e.g. Verčič, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996). This need for internationally focused, culturally attuned strategic communication professionals and expertise has since gained further prominence due to the rise of multinational organisations, the weakening –

or even complete removal in, for example, Europe – of traditional borders, increasingly multicultural societies and the arrival of digital media, all of which have amplified global visibility, opportunities and scrutiny (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Hodges, 2006; Macnamara, 2004; Sriramesh, 2003; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003). Simultaneously, higher education institutions are highlighting the significance of technology and cross-cultural skills as part of their graduate attributes, demanding an increased integration of internationalisation in the curriculum (see e.g. Curtin University, 2015), in order to prepare graduates for the anticipated challenges and changing work environments ahead.

In this paper, the authors discuss key findings from a longitudinal study, which examines the value, outcomes and challenges of an international learning experience that sets out to address the documented need for internationally attuned, strategic communication professionals in what has become known as the digital age. The Global Communications (GlobCom) Project invites students from up to 15 participating universities, across six continents, to collaboratively design solutions to an international real-life client's strategic communication problem. The students, from disciplines including marketing, public relations and communication are all arguably studying strategic communication in one form or another. This study provides critical, first-hand insights into the global learning experience from a student perspective, including the experience of working in multicultural, virtual (digital), collaborative teams.

First-hand insight into the perceived learning outcomes indicates an emphasis on what business leaders refer to as soft skills and

higher education institutions promote as generic skills to potential employers, as opposed to improved discipline-specific knowledge, and a greater understanding of cross-cultural communication. However, the authors question if participating students may underestimate the long-term benefits of the global learning experience and its impact on their future roles as strategic communicators and – potentially – industry leaders.

Literature review

Today's young communicators face very different challenges from those experienced by their more senior peers just one or two decades ago. Despite the ongoing need for strategic communicators, the employment market is becoming increasingly crowded and employers are progressively demanding regarding the scope of expected knowledge and skills. It has been argued that the nature of the workplace has dramatically changed, resulting in the rise of what has been labelled the Precariat class (see e.g. Miller, 2010; Standing, 2011; Standing, 2014). In his keynote address to the Public Relations and Advertising Conference (PRAD) 2016 (the focus of this special issue), McKie (2016) discussed the role of the Precariat as a significant factor in modern times. Located at the opposite end of the Elite, the Precariat is a social class that consists of (often) well-educated young people, who face an uncertainty around full-time work as a result of factors such as globalisation and changes in communication, in particular the rise of the internet and digital workplaces, as well as their associated challenges and opportunities. It has been well documented that today's graduate will change their jobs nine to 12 times during their working lives, including three to four complete career changes (Khare, 2007), which in return demands a high level of versatility. As early as in 2001 Jukes and McCain argued that many graduates will end up working in jobs that do not yet exist, again emphasising the fast-changing nature of jobs and technology, and both the impact on graduates and implications for learning institutions. With graduates facing (career) uncertainties and an insecure workplace as the 'new normal', this

paper argues that it is the university's role to prepare students for jobs with increasing complexity, including cross-cultural challenges, and the twin faces of more flexibility and mobility on one side, but less security and greater risks on the other. Furthermore, it is arguably higher education institutions' responsibility to provide students with opportunities to set themselves apart in order to move beyond the limitations of the Precariat. As a degree is no longer a guarantee of a graduate-level job in many parts of the world (see e.g. Copping, 2013), students (and universities) must look for in-degree experiences which give graduates an 'edge' over others competing in the same, global marketplace, i.e. opportunities to "add value" to their academic credentials (Tomlinson, 2008).

With the rise in complexity in the workplace, (future) employers place increased emphasis on so-called soft or employability skills (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011) and *work readiness* (Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009). For many years, universities have responded to these challenges by developing relevant graduate attributes. Graduate attributes can be defined as:

the skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts. It is intended that university students acquire these qualities as one of the outcomes of successfully completing any undergraduate degree at university. (Barrie, 2004, p. 262)

However, despite higher education institutions' aims to develop and describe generic attributes, there is a lack of clarity about what they should be and limited success in actually embedding them in courses (Barrie, 2004). Furthermore, generic attributes do not necessarily address discipline-specific requirements, such as a particular emphasis on written and verbal communication skills, or demonstration of leadership abilities, all of which are arguably crucial attributes of any successful communication career, but may not be as vital in other industries and discipline areas. Students therefore need to develop their

own “narrative of individual potential” (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 57) in order to position themselves beyond institutional reputation and grades (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin & Zehner, 2013) and hence to escape the precarious existence of the Precariat.

Harvey and Green’s UK study (2004) found the top 10 graduate attributes, according to employers, were: the willingness to learn; commitment; dependability; self-motivation; teamwork; communication skills (oral); co-operation; communication skills (written); drive/energy; and self-management. The eight employability skills identified by government and industry for Australian workplaces are: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning, and technology (Department of Education and Training, 2009). In a study for the Centre for Creative Leadership, Petrie (2014) argued that more complex thinkers are needed and that consequently the required skill sets for future leaders have changed. He emphasised the importance of adaptability, collaboration and network thinking to respond to changes in the environment. While cross-cultural communication and intercultural awareness were not singled out as ‘important’ by Harvey and Green, Petrie, or the Australian Government, there has been a simultaneous call for the ‘internationalisation of the curriculum’ from industry and universities alike. Within the communication context, academics have argued that the internationalisation of the curriculum and teaching from a multicultural perspective is imperative (George, 2003; Sriramesh, 2003; Tsetsura, 2011). Internationalisation has been defined as “the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program of study” (Leask, 2009, p. 210).

More than a decade ago the effective use of technology in the workplace was acknowledged as one of the key skills required for graduates (e.g. Yorke & Harvey, 2005) and this need has continued to become more prominent with the rise of the social/digital media age (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012). A recent European study confirmed the demand

for so-called specialist competencies amongst strategic communicators, in particular proficiency in working with new media and cross-cultural competencies (Tench & Moreno, 2015). Although there has been a global increase in public relations-specific education, driven by market demand, the impact of globalisation on public relations education is still poorly understood (Fitch, 2013). Scholars have highlighted a prominent ethnocentric focus within both public relations scholarship and teaching, with insights being predominantly limited to the United States (and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom) industry and models (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Fitch & Surma, 2006; L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2002).

While graduates are facing a tougher job market, there is nevertheless still a global skills shortage, particularly in what are considered to be more senior positions (Scott, 2014). The recruitment of suitably qualified staff reportedly constitutes an ongoing concern for heads of communication (Zerfass et al., 2012). The need for internationally focused, culturally attuned professionals and expertise has gained even more prominence due to the rise of multinational organisations. Increasingly multicultural societies and the arrival of digital media have amplified global visibility, opportunities and scrutiny of organisations (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Hodges, 2006; Macnamara, 2004; Sriramesh, 2003; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003). Employers have consequently expressed concerns regarding the gap between the demands of the work environment (mobile and globalised) on one hand, and students’ skill sets upon graduation (Andrews & Higson, 2008) on the other.

Given the rise in the need for digitally savvy, globally attuned communication professionals, this paper investigates how students perceive a real-world, work-integrated learning project, which involves them working across the globe in virtual teams to solve a client’s authentic, strategic communications challenge. The paper provides an in-depth insight into the student perspective and participants’ perceptions of the actual learning outcomes from a project which is embedded in undergraduate and post-

graduate courses at 15 universities across six continents.

The research question, based on a strategic communication lens, is:

How do students within a broad range of strategic communication courses view a real-life, client and project-based learning project that crosses borders and involves cross-cultural communication using digital technologies?

The Global Communications Project (GlobCom)

This study focuses on the Global Communications Project where students from up to 15 different universities, across six continents (Australia, Chile, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States) compete in multinational, global virtual teams to produce a strategic communication document in order to pitch their recommendations to an international real-life client. Participants in the GlobCom Project are studying public relations, marketing or communication in at least their third semester and some are in post-graduate courses. Each international e-team (comprising students from all universities in each team) receives the same client brief and has to consequently develop and submit a strategic communication solution in the form of a PowerPoint presentation – just as in a real-life pitch situation. The students of the e-teams communicate and cooperate with each other in a variety of ways, including Facebook, email, Skype and other forms of social/digital media.

The GlobCom Foundation is an initiative of the German Professor Dr Volker Stoltz. Dr Stoltz, a former owner and operator of a major international marketing and public relations agency, began the GlobCom Project due to the perceived dearth of relevant strategic communication skills he observed among practitioners working internationally, and the increasing demand from global companies and agencies for professionals with intercultural experiences. The GlobCom Project was designed to train students as part of a multicultural team in real international

situations. Dr Stoltz's concerns and aims are echoed in both the scholarly and industry literature where it is acknowledged that a major challenge for multinational employers is hiring people who can function effectively and efficiently across national boundaries (Webb, Mayer, Pioche & Allen, 1999).

Each year, students from up to 15 universities register online as part of up to 12 truly international teams. They meet their international team members and work on a strategic communication solution over a period of three months, before being presented with the opportunity to pitch their ideas to their real-life client at the end-of-semester GlobCom symposium. Final submissions are assessed by teaching staff from the participating universities to determine the finalists, before the overall winner is decided by a combination of the real-life client, industry representatives and the GlobCom executive. Each university embeds GlobCom slightly differently, depending on the unit it is linked to, assessment requirements and the local semester schedule. At the participating Australian university the final document – or report – is simultaneously marked for internal assessment purposes, based on a comprehensive marking rubric that is aligned with the university's graduate objectives and pre-identified learning outcomes.

Students who have the time and resources are invited to travel to the client and hosting university's home city for the live client pitches, a three-day conference and a chance to meet their international team members. Past clients have included Airbus, the Abu Dhabi-based environmental organisation AGEDI, (the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative), the city of Stellenbosch in South Africa, Zeiss Vision Care, and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Methodology

The findings reported here are from a longitudinal study, which captured the perceptions of student participants in GlobCom regarding the international – and, in particular, virtual – learning experience over three years (2012 to 2014). Each year, towards the end of the GlobCom Project, an online survey (using

the survey tool Qualtrics) was emailed to all GlobCom participants. Follow-up reminders were sent via email, and prompts and multiple reminders were also given through social media (Twitter and Facebook).

Response rates are difficult to determine, as country representatives are frequently supported by a local backup team. However, over the three years of data collection the total number of valid responses was 221. Participation rates varied greatly (especially in some countries) from year to year. The nationalities which did participate in the survey were: Australia, Germany, India, Italy, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Spain, UAE, United Kingdom and Chile. Notable non-participants were students from the USA¹. It has been impossible to convince North American participants to contribute to the feedback survey, most likely due to the end of the project coinciding with the end of their study programme.

Survey questions explored demographics, technologies used and the virtual team experience. While some quantitative data was collected, the aim of the survey was to uncover the deep learning of respondents. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, the authors were particularly interested in the open-ended sections that encouraged students to reflect on the learning outcomes, advice to future participants and perceived challenges associated with the GlobCom experience. Responses were initially grouped by broad themes (e.g. challenges, learning outcomes, technology) and then independently coded via NVivo 10 by the two researchers, allowing triangulation of the data and further discussion of and reflection on the findings.

Findings

Responses are limited to those students who opted into the project. At various universities students are given the option to either participate as part of the global, virtual teams,

¹ Note: both Malaysia and Thailand have since joined the GlobCom Project, but are not included in the data set under review for this paper. As no data has been received from US participants, the total sample size of countries for the purpose of this study is reduced to 12.

or to limit their involvement to working only locally with their unit peers. Hence, the sample is arguably limited to students who already demonstrate a high level of initiative and preparedness to stretch themselves beyond the minimum requirements. Furthermore, 44.4% of respondents were local team leaders, 13% had been acting in a global team leader role and 47.8% had attended the annual GlobCom symposium. These figures further demonstrate the respondents' high level of engagement in the project prior to participation in the online survey.

Nevertheless, the requirement to work in large, virtual teams across multiple time zones, to overcome time pressures and language differences, as well as the need to work on a brief given by a commonly unfamiliar client, addressing a communication challenge in a foreign cultural context proved a challenge for even some of the most committed students. 83.8% of participants described the GlobCom experience as challenging or even extremely challenging. However, arguably surprisingly, the demanding nature of the learning experience did not negatively impact on the continuously high satisfaction rates, which ranked between 70 to 80%.

93% of participants stated that their participation had improved their understanding of international public relations. However, this quantitative feedback did not necessarily correlate with the themes emerging in the qualitative sections of this study, where students emphasised different learning outcomes. These will be analysed and discussed in a later section of this paper.

When asked about the challenges associated with the project, teamwork and time management clearly emerged as key issues. Some of these were GlobCom-related. For example, with two representatives from each participating university, team sizes frequently become difficult to manage. As one respondent described it: "The communication and the working [sic] in such large teams often created a challenge!" However, many other challenges described were direct reflections of those encountered in a professional context, i.e. the need to adapt to and recognise different time zones ("round-the-clock experience"), language

barriers, cultural differences and variations in motivation to proactively contribute to the project outcomes (“It’s a pity [sic] that some team members did not participate in the meetings at all”). Participants in particular struggled with the virtual collaboration component of the project. Although the GlobCom portal was originally provided as the designated platform, teams migrated to other platforms of their choice, which often consisted of a combination of social media sites, wikis and teleconferencing facilities. Although the advantages and shortcomings of these different collaboration platforms are beyond the focus of this paper, it is worth noting that teams frequently altered their suite of collaboration platforms, frequently only determining the most appropriate tools once prompted to reflect by the end-of-project survey. Facebook was the communication tool of choice, which has been attributed to the fact that “everyone is already on it”, i.e. it provided a convenient platform to update team members across time zones without requiring an additional login. However, it is worth noting that access to Facebook may have suited the majority of participants, but was occasionally restricted for some nationalities.

Beyond the purely technological aspects and requirements, the virtual nature of the collaboration highlighted cultural differences and further emphasised the potential for misunderstandings and interpretations. As one respondent explained: “Different cultures do things differently and sometimes those clashes became obvious during meetings.” Attendance at the end-of-project symposium was widely perceived as a crucial element of the overall learning experience, enabling participants to match their international peers’ online, offline and non-verbal communication in order to gain a more rounded understanding of cultural differences and similarities:

I learnt how to communicate with different countries and, so, with different cultures, how to structure and improve a PR campaign. I also experienced the difference between the computer-mediated communication and the personal relationship.

Multiple respondents advised hypothetical future participants to invest (more) time into getting to know their international team members at the beginning of the projects, highlighting that this is something they frequently overlooked due to a focus on deadlines and project progress.

I have learned to work with people who speak other languages and in different time zones, working with people from other cultures and different personalities, which is very complicated.

The multicultural, international nature of the project required participants to improve their communication, and in particular, listening skills. Tolerance, open-mindedness and diplomacy emerged as key themes. Arguably, these skills are required as part of any teamwork project; however, the diverse backgrounds of participants, as well as the virtual components, emphasised the need – and also challenged participants – to upskill:

I was able to work with a team of dynamic individuals who were very different in some aspects, yet similar in others. This often resulted in conflict regarding differences in opinions, which helped to realise another important learning experience, namely that in the real world, people differ and conflict will arise. GlobCom helped me to come to terms with this and deal with it in a manner which helped to abate conflict. Despite this, our team was able to put these differences aside and work together to create a PR strategy that we were proud of.

And:

I learned to work effectively in a group, with people from different country [sic], cultures and values. I learned how everyone has different opinions and all of them are valuable in some point or the other. I learnt the importance of listening as it is the most important factor when working in a large team. Overall my experience was fun-filled,

lot of learning but in a very innovative way.

This awareness was furthermore clearly reflected in the advice provided to (hypothetical) future participants: “Be open-minded and don't think your way is the only way of doing something. Get into the mindset of working in a diverse team.”

Beyond basic cultural differences, participants realised that public relations was being understood and taught differently in the varying cultural contexts:

Getting to a common decision with the group, so as the cultural differences...[sic] The hardest part was to unify our different understandings of PR and our studies.

Some of these variances were due to differences in participants' majors, i.e. some were enrolled in marketing communication degrees or related disciplines. However, much of the origin of different perspectives on public relations and in particular project requirements was due to cultural contexts, advancements of the industry in the respective countries, and its corresponding positioning in society.

I learnt that education and communication is really different in every country especially in terms of assignment writing and understanding. Everyone seems to have a different understanding of PR and a PR plan, which was interesting.

Despite the associated challenges, insight into different cultural backgrounds emerged as a key theme and learning outcome in the qualitative parts of this study. Participants truly valued the wide range of contacts they were able to make as a result of this project. Furthermore, many highlighted the valuable contribution different cultural perspectives had made to the quality of their recommendations and project outcomes: “Cultural differences were [...] evident, although this made it really interesting.” Furthermore:

I would encourage an open mind in discussing ideas and approaches in any conversation. Ideas that may at first

seem out of the box may provide a point of difference for the assignment.

And:

I also learn't [sic] that having people from different countries provides a wider perspective for the creation of ideas in public relations.

The end of semester and project symposium played a particularly important role in this context, allowing participants to consolidate their impressions, observations and learning outcomes, as well as to provide face-to-face access to team members, the real-life client, international teaching staff, plus immersion in the culture the client brief was based on (e.g. United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Borneo/Malaysia). As one respondent explained:

I had witnessed in full the necessity of suspending your own cultural beliefs and practices in order to create empathy and understanding of other cultures in your new surroundings. This was developed by the mix of cultural backgrounds present at the conference as well as the support and sharing of local cultures in Abu Dhabi.

The symposium experience hence enabled participants to place the GlobCom experience within their broader, future career context, recognising the (positive) impact it may have on their future employability and employment directions.

It is worth noting that the official language for GlobCom is English, thereby providing participants from Australia, the UK, the US and to a certain extent South Africa (for most participating students from South Africa, Afrikaans is their first language), with a perceived advantage. However, non-native speakers extensively commented on the benefits GlobCom provided in terms of English language proficiency, thereby highlighting additional learning outcomes (“I learnt to join with them and loose [sic] the fear about speak in English”), but also (unique) challenges and sources of frustration: “It's so difficult to work with people when you cannot speak their language”.

Discussion

This study has highlighted what educators have long suspected, namely that Generation Y is not as digitally savvy as long assumed. Participants struggled with the virtual component of the GlobCom Project, not only in terms of communication requirements, but also in regard to locating appropriate tools and platforms for successful, productive collaboration. Although Facebook may have been the go-to platform of choice, this was largely due to convenience, rather than a critical exploration of other options. Participants across the years were reluctant to venture beyond their limited knowledge of collaboration tools. Alongside increased cross-cultural awareness and an appreciation for both the challenges and benefits of drawing on different lenses and perspectives as part of the creative process, the technological awareness (including recognising existing gaps in their knowledge) emerged as one of the key learning outcomes. If this is the digital age, graduates are arguably not sufficiently equipped – or at least not as well as it has long been assumed.

The vast majority of respondents may have agreed that the GlobCom experience had improved their discipline specific knowledge, however, when further prompted, it emerged that these public relations-specific insights were largely limited to students from related discipline areas and/or enrolled in the first year(s) of their degree. Once respondents further unpacked the actual learning outcomes, the emphasis shifted away from discipline-specific knowledge and insights to (higher level) soft and professional skills, such as listening skills, tolerance, conflict resolution and diplomacy – as well as a better understanding of the key ingredients of successful teamwork, and especially leadership. Respondents' feedback on the GlobCom Project and its learning outcomes therefore corresponded with Petrie's (2014) observations in regard to the skills needed to succeed in today's increasingly complex, uncertain and rapidly changing environments.

Despite the teamwork nature of the GlobCom Project, feedback indicates that learning opportunities like this provide a very

personal learning experience, which depends very much on the level of commitment the individual is prepared to invest. Unprompted responses highlighted how participants found their personal views and preconceptions challenged as part of the global learning experience. They furthermore indicated how they took proactive charge of their learning journey and skills development – no matter if in terms of improving language proficiency, enhancing listening skills or working on their competencies in terms of tolerance and diplomacy – in order to positively influence the team outcome, as well as their own experience. By nature, the actual GlobCom experience varies from individual to individual. There may be commonalities in terms of (broad) learning outcomes and skills development, but the final outcomes depend as much on dedication and a preparedness to embrace the unknown, i.e. the often ambiguous nature of the project, as well as the commitment to use experiences like this to construct a personal career narrative, or “narrative of individual potential” (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 57). Ironically, four decades ago, internationally renowned academic and author on business and management Henry Mintzberg called on educators to make greater use of experiential learning as “effective managers seem to revel in ambiguity; in complex mysterious systems with relatively little order” (Mintzberg, 1976, p. 53), i.e. employers are seeking communicators who possess the necessary skills and determination to embrace the unknown and adapt their skill sets accordingly. Most students complete their degree at a single university, hence becoming accustomed to the institution's culture and teaching staff's expectations. Educators frequently see the same students working together, thereby ultimately providing students with a work environment that is increasingly homogenous and lacking challenging or opposing perspectives. Projects like GlobCom arguably challenge both the monotony and relative safety of previous learning experiences, forcing students to leave their comfort zone. Higher education institutions may be able to offer these types of skills and portfolio-building opportunities, as well as to embed them as part of the existing curriculum. However, educators

have limited control over the depth of immersion at an individual level, hence the extent to which projects like this impact on the long-term careers of individual graduates.

The attendance at the symposium highlights this point. Although many of the participating universities provide scholarship or grant opportunities for participants who choose to travel to the host university for the end of the project and an opportunity to meet their international peers and the real-life client, a surprisingly small number of students takes up this opportunity due to “conflicting commitments” (for example, two, four and five Australian delegates travelled to South Africa, Boston and Miri, Borneo respectively). This is despite actual study participants documenting the crucial role the face-to-face component performed as part of their overall learning experience. Meeting team members appeared to consolidate their cross-cultural experience. It furthermore enabled them to build their professional networks to be drawn on well after the GlobCom experience has come to an end. The ability to present with the client and gain professional, live feedback is not only something that delegates add to their CV and professional portfolio, but is also an experience that shapes their future practice and communication efforts.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to this special edition on Strategic Communication in the Digital Age by providing a first-hand insight into students’ learning experience as part of a real-life client project, which draws both on communication skills as well as technological skills. Additional challenges and learning experiences are not necessarily appreciated by all students, however, those who are driven and committed report unique benefits. Major learning outcomes of participation in the international GlobCom Project focused on soft or generic skills, as opposed to discipline-specific understanding, despite the subject-specific project focus. The learning outcomes were extremely similar to those espoused in the literature and in many universities’ own generic graduate attributes. As a first step, this paper

highlights the soft skills required by future strategic communication professionals working in the digital and global age. Success in the digital age may require a certain level of technical skills, but more importantly it demands excellent on- and offline communication skills, tolerance, empathy and diplomacy. Whilst higher education institutions have traditionally focused on embedding these type of skills within the curriculum, there appears to be a lack of ensuring that students possess the actual competencies when they enter the workforce.

Today’s student cohort is frequently assumed to consist of digital natives. However, as digital technologies advance – and are increasingly relied on for communication purposes – the intersection of technology, language and the management of interpersonal relations presents a number of challenges that future communication professionals appear to be ill-equipped to meet. Despite respondents’ overwhelmingly positive feedback (often contrasting with university’s own end-of-semester survey tools), the researchers believe that the true learning outcomes will only be visible and appreciated in the long-term, i.e. retrospectively. Furthermore, they argue that higher education institutions may be able to provide and embed learning opportunities that prepare their graduates for the increasingly challenging employment market ahead. However, ultimately, the responsibility lies with the individual learner to embrace these opportunities, re-evaluate their own abilities, address their skills gaps and take control of their personal career narrative. In the words of one of the study participants: “Working across cultures can be very hard or it can be very easy. It depends on your mindset.” Arguably, the same can be said about future career opportunities for strategic communicators. The demand for talent with the appropriate skills remains. However, simply graduating from a communication degree is no longer sufficient. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to write their own career narrative and to venture beyond the limitations of the Precariat.

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Katharina is equally passionate about student-centred, work integrated learning; a commitment that has been recognised with a number of local and national awards, including a 2011 Australian Learning and Teaching Award for Excellence in Teaching and two Curtin University Awards for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching.

Catherine Archer is a researcher and lecturer in public relations with the School of Arts at Murdoch University. Catherine is undertaking her PhD at the University of WA focusing on bloggers (in particular mums who blog) and their interactions within their community, with their readers and with marketers. Her Masters' thesis looked at employer branding in the health industry. Catherine has published in academic journals and presented at many international conferences. Prior to working as an academic, Catherine had more than 15 years in industry, working in services marketing management as well as public relations, communications and consulting.

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