Changing the public relations curriculum:
A new challenge for educators.

Donald Alexander
Charles Sturt University

Public relations education is facing a fundamental challenge to its theoretical and pedagogical directions. Unless educators respond to the changes that technology is bringing to the communities they serve, the academy faces the prospect of becoming irrelevant by not providing students with the skills and knowledge required by the marketplace. A strategic view, therefore, needs to be taken of future practitioner, client, and student needs. This article discusses the impact of technology on public relations practice, reviews the specific literature of curriculum development in the Asia Pacific region, and offers some perspectives on future directions for strategic public relations curriculum planning.

Public relations theory, new concepts and the challenge of technology

Practitioners in the public relations field are being challenged with a new range of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, and this is of particular importance to contemporary Australasian and Asian Pacific public relations academics. This is because public relations in the region historically developed out of journalism and press agentry, and this history has informed much of the present curriculum. In Australia, early academic public relations courses were heavily vocationally focused and directed toward managing the print channel (daily, weekly, and monthly newspapers; brochures; trade magazines; and staff newsletters) as the primary means of communicating with publics. The initial Public Relations Institute of Australia university course accreditation process also had a strong emphasis on writing, grammar, and how to construct press releases for print mediums. Radio was also an early significant channel for distributing public relations-sourced messages to mass audiences.

This meant developing a different writing style to ensure public relations material was acceptable to the newsrooms.

With the advent of television, training in how to handle this form of media became a new source of business for public relations practitioners as they offered clients courses in this skill, often handled by former television news staff.

The creation of schools of communication in tertiary institutions, which housed both public relations and journalism courses within the same environment, further emphasised the relationship between the two former technically-oriented vocations (Putnis & Axford, 2002). Public relations text books in the 1970s and early 1980s were mostly sourced from the United States and these also emphasised the links between public relations and the media.

There was a shift in direction in the United States in the early 1980s, with researchers becoming aware that other disciplines such as speech communication, interpersonal communication, sociology, psychology and organisational development had something to offer the developing field of public relations.

Early studies of communication as a science were centred on theories of persuasion (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Berger & Chaffee, 1987; Neff, 1989). By 1986, the ground had moved to the "ways people use media information and how they develop mutual definitions of their social relationships with others" (Berger & Chaffee, 1987, p. 15).

Public relations theorisation subsequently moved forward with relationship management being a key area for current research and academic discussion (Lindenmann, 1998; Grunig & Hon, 1999; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ledingham, 2003; Bruning, 2000). From previous one-way communication using mediated channels, increasing evidence is being presented (see the authors mentioned above, as

well as Ledingham, 2001, and Bruning & Galloway, 2003) that "public relations is undergoing a major paradigmatic shift" (Ledingham, 2001, p. 286).

This shift to a relational perspective and the need to "establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships" (Pohl & Vandeventer, 2001), is concurrent with a dramatic shift in the means by which public relations operates. From print and electronic mass media, the wide range of more personal, digital means of communicating is creating the need for a new grouping of public relations disciplines and skills. The internet, email, and online chat; mobile telephones and associated SMS (short message service) and graphics capacity; handheld personal digital assistants and satellite television systems that allow for interactivity between viewers, are fundamentally changing the means of communication. The problems created by these technologies include their initial expense in hardware and systems and the widening of the divide between communities that are wealthy enough to invest in these systems and those countries and communities that cannot afford functional telephones and the cost of maintaining them. While important, these are issues beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on a pedagogical response to CMC-generated opportunities. CMC is understood in this paper as "communication between two or more persons facilitated and mediated by computers and computer networks" (Dougall, Fox, & Burton, 2001, p. 17).

Holtz (1999, p. 15) has argued that "the Internet has changed communication forever". With many public relations academics entrenched in the tradition of teaching mediated communication to deliver messages to key publics, the shift in direction necessitated by technology is creating new challenges for the academy and practitioners.

New channels, new practices, new skills

Technology has created new channels and methods of communication. Heath (1998) and Gorelick (1998) have discussed the breakdown of mass markets into discrete, individualised markets, referred to pinpoint targeting, and the situation where the Internet and the world wide web do "not allow media reporters, editors, and news directors – or governmental officials – to be the final power in determining whether issues discussants can have their voices heard" (Heath, 1998, p. 274).

Janal (2000), Hurme (2001), and Alexander (2002) have stated that these technological developments have reinforced the relationship aspect of public relations where practitioners can now engage directly in two-way symmetrical/mixed motive communication with key publics.

Special interest groups, key influencers, activists, and shareholders, for example, can now be more readily identified, their details entered into a database and direct, one-on-one interactive relationships created. Developments such as specialist online newsletters (for example http://www.crikey.com.au, and http://www.commercialadvocate.com), subscription cable television, and SMS or email listervs, bypass many of the traditional forms of communication used by public relations practitioners, such as media relations and direct mail. While these changes present challenges and opportunities, they also create possible problems such as managing privacy issues, higher workloads as a result of identifying and managing more discrete groups, exhausting the capacity to learn the wide range of software required such as Dreamweaver and Macromedia Flash, and ethical questions relating to research practices using the Web.

Reviewing current practices

A review of current practitioners' and academics' attitudes toward and understanding of the issues raised in this paper was completed in December 2003. Singh and Smyth (2000) reported on interviews with two former national presidents of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, and both respondents stated that technology and innovation were challenges facing public relations in the region. Former president Lelde McCoy questioned whether "practitioners were technology savvy, both in leveraging the technologies and in understanding how to strategically use

technology in a business," while Jim McNamara argued that there was a need for practitioners to effectively master technology (Singh & Smyth, 2000, p. 400).

According to research by Dougall, Fox and Burton (2001), other industry practitioners in Australia are only slightly aware of the potential impact of technology. The key outcome of their extensive survey of 538 Australian practitioners (44% in consultancies, 23.6% corporate employees, and 23.2% in government) was that practitioners "have yet to effectively and comprehensively adopt and integrate CMC" (ibid, p. 30).

Respondents stated that information dissemination was seen as the greatest benefit of CMC and there was a high level of agreement that the Internet was an additional one-way mass publishing medium. Interactive elements such as online focus groups and chat rooms were among the least referred to and usage was "quite low" (ibid, p. 30).

There was general agreement that the "power of CMC was growing" (ibid, p.28), that it provided increased opportunities for two-way communication, and was "ushering in an era of greater dialogue between organisations and their stakeholders" (ibid, p. 29).

There are some exceptions. Australian internet communications consultant, Peter Heininger (http://www.heininger.com.au), in email correspondence with the author (personal communication, October 14, 2002), refers to technology creating a new personal relations model, where "for organisations to thrive, they must open up genuine personal dialogue with all audiences critical to their ongoing success. They must become truly involved with their audiences-on as many levels as possible". This view supports the changing dynamics of the field.

All the Public Relations Institute of Australia accredited undergraduate public relations courses offered by 16 Australian universities were reviewed for specific references to courses or subjects that referred to the place of technology in public relations practice. Each course name was recorded, the course outline assessed for any references to technology, and the content of each subject analysed for any specific references to technology and public relations.

A general reference to technology was made by one New South Wales institution which referred to "new developments in communication industries" in its public relations course overview, and a specific subject mentions that the role of technological innovations is examined. Out of the 16 institutions, seven offered specific subjects that made references to technology. One Queensland university, under its media relations and publicity course, has a subject, Electronic Media Opportunities, that refers to using web sites to support media relations. A Western Australian university offers the subject Contemporary Issues in Public Relations Communication, and an Australian Capital Territory university offers two subjects, Internet Media and Communication, and New Technology and Globalisation.

The use of online research and website analysis is referred to in the outline of a South Australian university's public relations course and there is also a specific subject, Contemporary Issues in Public Relations Communication. A New South Wales university offers Electronic Research Methods as a subject and a Victorian university has an Electronic and Internet Public Relations core subject.

A survey was administered to all members of the edu-pr-net, managed through Deakin University. This online network covers nearly 100 academics in Australia who are engaged in public relations research and teaching. There were ten responses from six universities, all respondents stating they were course coordinators and the institutions were located in the principal capital city universities teaching accredited courses.

A summary of the responses indicated that all included the use of the world wide web as a research tool; six referred to using the Internet as a relationship building tool; seven discussed the ethics of cyberspace; eight had electives in web design; and only four mentioned database management skills as being included in subject material. Other specific responses were using the Internet for crisis-management and also the use of online technologies for distance subjects,

such as chat rooms and submission of assignments.

While this survey has limitations due to the small number of responses, and the review of PRIA courses is only of published subject and course content, it is contended that with such a radical change in the basis of public relations becoming evident in research, there is an urgent need for academics and practitioners to review current course and subject content and work towards ensuring future practitioners are capable of working in the new public relations environment.

The need for change

As a consequence of these developments, new theories and skills will need to be introduced into the public relations curriculum to ensure future practitioners are capable of meeting the demands of their communities. Pohl and Vandeventer argue that "Successful institutions and professors must respond to the changing economic climate and reflect the realities found in their communities. Educational missions must be modified to accommodate communities and their needs" (2001, p. 357).

There has been very little academic analysis of the state of Australian public relations education. Singh and Smyth (2000) reviewed the status of Australian public relations going into the new millennium, and they refer to previous research into public relations education in Australia by Quarles and Potts (1990). Quarles and Potts found there should be "more emphasis" on "computer education" (cited in Singh & Smyth, 2000, p. 390), but make no other references to the impact that technology might have on academic courses.

Some detailed analysis of public relations curricula has been made in the United States. Neff, Walker, Smith, and Creedon (1999) analysed the National Communication Association's 1998 national survey, which asked what learning objectives were required of the United States academic and practitioner communities. They assessed what the outcomes should be for entry and advanced level academic courses, and also reported on practitioner expectations.

They found that entry-level courses had no references to the need to understand technology, but at the advanced level there was a requirement that students should be able to manage communication and information technologies, integrate technology into practice, and keep up to date with emerging technology. The United States Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) issued its Port of Entry report in 1999. It used the National Communication Association's 1998 national survey as the basis for its findings (CPRE, 1999).

The Port of Entry document refers to the "veritable explosion of one-to-one communication and the technology to implement it" (CPRE, 1999, p. 1), and also suggests that public relations education in the future "can and must look like it is to meet the needs of the profession" (p. 2). The report document acknowledged that necessary skills for undergraduate education included, among other things, "Technological and Visual Literacy."

Technology is not specifically mentioned in the discussion on graduate education needs. A pilot study of United States master's degree courses by Aldoory and Toth (2000) made no references to technology as a core or optional course.

An Australian academic who was one of the co-authors of the Neff et al. report, and the only non-United States participant in the task team, produced a follow-up paper (Walker, 2000). Walker analysed the 1998 United States research in an Asian Pacific context and suggested that the research was "extremely relevant to how we in the Asia Pacific area should design tertiary courses to produce the outcomes we want in our own future practitioners" (p. 45).

Walker's paper specifically refers to entry-level practitioners being expected to have acquired "a set of attitudes as much as any content from their education" (p. 44) and refers to expectations that education should "provide tailor-made ready-to-work practitioners who can

walk into a practice and earn their keep immediately" (p. 44).

In a special edition of *Public Relations Review* (2001) on developing teaching related materials, Taylor (2001) offered guidance to public relations educators on how to develop an international public relations curriculum because, "new communication technologies and global communication processes create more frequent international communication" (p. 2).

There is also a reference to the "pervasiveness of technologies for use in public relations" (p2) and the use of the Internet as a research tool. Taylor also refers to the National Communication Association's 1998 summer conference which recommended that "students should understand new technology, be able to manage communication and information technologies, integrate technology into practice and keep up-to-date with emerging technology" (p. 3). In Taylor's draft course outline there is a specific reference to the use of new communication technologies to create contact between US and international students and various software packages are described that "allow students to work in mediated terms" (p. 14).

Pohl and Vandeventer (2001) discuss a research project where they identified the skills and knowledge that undergraduate US students require to "enter the workplace to be effective entry-level practitioners" (p. 358). There were three references to technology. The first dealt with the role of technology, and practitioners agreed there was growing need for it, but few actually used it for anything more than distributing news, contacting the media, research, or monitoring the competition.

When asked where technology was heading, practitioners' primary concerns were with the Internet as a source and much quicker distributor of information, but they believed that it would not replace personal relationships. When asked about the impact of technology on public relations, there was a strong response that technology allowed for more interactivity and that the media as "we know it will cease to exist as a disseminator of information "(p. 363).

Possible new directions for public relations educators

This brief review demonstrates that those responsible for curriculum development still have a long way to go considering the data from recent research into tomorrow's public relations world (Hurme, 2001; Holtz, 1999; Alexander, 2002). Educators will need to provide a thorough grounding in how technology can facilitate relationship management and meet the needs expressed by the practitioner respondents to recent surveys (Singh & Smyth, 2000; Neff, Walker, Smith & Creedon, 1999; Dougall, Fox & Burton, 2001; Walker, 2000).

Alexander (2002) states that the public relations professional of the future needs to develop a new range of specialist skills, which includes the following:

- Understanding database management and how to construct a system that will collect and store information on all stakeholders. This information may need to be cross-referenced with demographic and psychographic data so the organisation has a deeper understanding of its publics or stakeholders and can therefore be more responsive meeting their needs.
- Creating web sites that are creative and engaging and which encourage interaction such as including invitations to request information or participating in an online survey.
- Knowing the software programmes which manage online relationships, such as being able to track how many contacts received an email; how many opened it and how many used any of the embedded links to other information included in the email.
- Understanding the principles of collaboration software that can sort through a wide range of websites, chat rooms and news lists to find matches based on interests, memberships, or education that could be used to create a potential community of interest.
- Being able to conduct online research to monitor the opinions or attitudes of key publics or test reactions to developments.

- Understanding online interviewing techniques, how to conduct electronic focus groups or manage email surveys (Gaddis, 2001).
- A developing online relationship can strengthen if an organisation can offer online assistance to publics or stakeholders in areas such as research, or statistics. This is a further means of keeping a public or a community of interest informed without them having to rely on media sources.

Academics also need to respond to technological change outside the classroom. Ashcroft and Hoey argue that the creation of online academic journals has substantially diminished the need for printed versions (2001) and state that speed of communication and almost-immediate product delivery are possible, as is interactivity, "a two-way process allows the customer and supplier to communicate, contrasting with the more familiar one-way business transaction" (p. 68). This creates an opportunity to widen communication communities and for publishers to better tailor products that meet customers' needs. This pressure on academics in the era of research-driven higher education funding will mean a re-ordering of priorities and a higher level of commitment to producing papers for the online journal environment.

Other trends that will require course developers' attention are the closer integration of public relations with marketing in integrated marketing communication (IMC), which is also being increasingly technology driven. Eagle and Kitchen (2000), discussing the need for communicators and marketers to change, state that "tertiary educators themselves have been slow to recognize the need to adapt programmes to meet changing marketplace needs" (p. 669).

It is in the interests of the future of effective public relations practice that curriculum and course developers understand the trends outlined above and start to create a wider range of academic offerings that will be ahead of future employer expectations and ensure students of the future are well prepared to meet the demands of a new era.

References:

Ashcroft, L., & Hoey, C. (2001). PR, marketing and the internet: Implications for information professionals. *Library Management*, *22*(1/2), 68.

Aldoory, L., & Toth, E. L. (2000). An exploratory look at graduate public relations education. *Public Relations Review*, *26*(1), 115-126.

Alexander, D. (2002), New information and communication technologies and the 'demassification' of public relations, *Australia New Zealand Communication Association On-line Journal,* July 2002. http://www.bond.edu.au/hss/communication/ANZCA/anzca.html

Berger, C. R., & S. H. Chaffee, (1987). *Handbook of Communication Science.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Bruning, S. D. (2000). Examining the role that personal, professional, and community relationships play in respondent relationship recognition and intended behavior. *Communication Quarterly*, *48*(4), 437–448.

Bruning, S. E., & Galloway, T. (2003). Expanding the organization-public relationship scale: Exploring the role that structural and personal commitment play in organization-public relations, *Public Relations Review, 29*(3), 309–320.

Bruning, S. E., & Ledingham, J. A. (1999). Relationships between organizations and publics: development of a multi-dimensional organization-public relationship scale, *Public Relations Review 25*(2), 157.

Bruns, A. (2003). Gatewatching, not gatekeeping: Collaborative online news. *Media International Australia*, *107*, 31–44

Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE). (1999). *Port of Entry; The 1999 Commission on Public Relations Education Report.* Retrieved 01 October 2002 from: http://www.towson.edu/prcommission/referenc.htm

Dougall, E., Fox, A., & Burton, L. J. (2001). Interactivity, influence, and issues management: The impacts and implications of computer-mediate communication for Australian public relations practitioners. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal, 3*(2), 17–34.

Eagle, L., & Kitchen, P. J. (2000). IMC, brand communications, and corporate cultures, *European Journal of Marketing*, *34*(5/6), 667–686

Gaddis, S. E. (2001). On-line research techniques for the public relations practitioner. In R. L Heath (Ed.) *Handbook of Public Relations*, (pp. 591-602). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Gorelick, D. (1998). Understanding marketplace behaviour. *Graphic Arts Monthly, 70*(5), 98.

Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., & Ehling, W. P. (1999). What is an effective organisation. In James E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management,* Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Wilson.

Heath, R. L. (1998). New communication technologies: an issues management point of view, *Public Relations Review, 24*(3)

Holtz, S. (1999). *Public relations on the 'Net: Winning strategies to inform and influence the media, the investment community, the government, the public, and more!* NY: AMACOM.

Hon, L. C., & Grunig, J. E. (1999). *Measuring relationships in public relations.* Gainesville, FL: Institute for Public Relations.

Hurme, P. (2001). Online PR: Emerging organizational practice. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 6(2), 71-75.

Janal, D. S. (2000). *Dan Janal's guide to marketing on the Internet: Getting people to visit, buy and become customers for life.* New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Ledingham, J. A., (2001). Government-community relationships: Extending the relational theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review, 27,* 285–295.

Ledingham, J. A. (2003). Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *15*(2), 181–198.

Lindenmann, W. K. (1998). Measuring relationships is a key to successful public relations. *Public Relations Quarterly*, *43*(4) p.18

Neff, B. D. (1989). Chapter 9, The Emerging Theoretical Perspective in PR: An Opportunity for Communication Departments. In C. H Botan, & V. Hazleton Jr. (Eds.) *Public Relations Theory*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Neff, B. D., Walker, G., Smith, M. F., & Creedon, P. J. (1999). Outcomes desired by practitioners and academics, *Public Relations Review, 25* I1, p. 29

Pohl, G. M., & Vandeventer, D, (2001). The workplace, undergraduate education, and career preparation. In R. L Heath (Ed.) *Handbook of Public Relations*, (pp. 357–368). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Putnis, P., & Axford, B. (2002). Communication and media studies in Australian universities. *Australian Journal of Communication*, *29*(1), pp. 1–20

Singh, R., & Smyth, R (2000) Australian public relations: Status at the turn of the 21st century, *Public Relations Review 26*(4), 387-404.

Taylor, M. (2001). Internationalizing the public relations curriculum, *Public Relations Review, 27*(1), 73-88.

Walker, G. (2000). What outcomes should public relations education provide? *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* 1 (2), 35-46.