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## Exercises in rhetorical form: Teaching public relations from a praxis perspective.

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### Abstract

*"Exercises in Rhetorical Form" seeks pragmatic ways of educating future public relations leaders in praxis. This article addresses praxis as an orientation that can assist pedagogical implementations in three areas. First, public relations campaign practices may be approached as exercises in rhetorical form, dependent on broad-based knowledge of human persuasion. Second, the medium of the classroom may be constructed into a message about professional civility when course communication mirrors that of a public relations firm rather than a traditional classroom. Third, public relations can be readily linked to lived experience in the world, particularly in the study of civic engagement. From these areas, the article works to discern implications for public relations pedagogy and practice, especially in humanities-based public relations programs.<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

Almost 60 years ago, Krimel (1947) surveyed the burgeoning public relations curricula in American universities and discovered a number of challenges to public relations pedagogy. One of these challenges was a clear need on the part of public relations educators for consultation (and perhaps collaboration) with public relations professionals. Another challenge emerged when such consultation did occur. Public relations practitioners indicated a preference for pedagogy that fostered the "proper attitudes" in future public relations professionals, and they considered writing skills a secondary concern

for public relations courses (Krimel, 1947). Today, little has changed in public relations pedagogy worldwide. Assessing the state of public relations education in the United Kingdom, L'Etang (1999) wrote:

Public relations practitioners... continue to set more store upon expertise, experience and ill-defined and subjectively assessed 'personal qualities' than upon qualifications attesting to a body of knowledge and a set of skills (p. 283, emphasis mine).

Although a recent US-based National Communication Association (NCA) initiative on public relations pedagogy revealed that public relations practitioners and educators generally agree on the skills students need to acquire, public relations practitioners were most critical of the *teaching methods* used in public relations courses (Stacks, Botan, & Turk, 1999). At the same time, professional societies in public relations have offered virtually no support, encouragement, or tools for improving public relations curricula (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999). Public relations scholars and educators themselves have not fared much better: academic societies also tend to overlook support and encouragement (and even tools) for public relations pedagogy, and academics have undertaken very little rigorous research into pedagogical issues (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999).

Several factors may account for the ambivalent relationship between public relations' professional and academic realms. The lack of research into teaching methods may plague all fields of communication, not just public relations (Sprague, 1993). At the time of the aforementioned NCA inquiry, too, fewer

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the thinking in this article was presented at The Oxford Conference on Social Values in Education and Business, Oxford University, UK, 2004.

college instructors had adopted new technology—so a follow-up study may show that public relations practitioners are less critical of current teaching methods. But I suspect the divide runs deeper. In her historical overview of public relations education in the United Kingdom, L'Etang (1999) speculates that education was initially appreciated because of the legitimacy it might ascribe to the professional field. However, “‘education’ quickly became synonymous with training (processes, procedures, and routines) and practitioners’ interest in education was purely instrumental” (L'Etang, 1999, p. 283). As this insight indicates, there is long-term misunderstanding about the relationship between *theory* and *practice*, or between *education* and *training*. The experiments of the Institute for Public Relations, which L'Etang (1999) describes, were unsuccessful because “practical” professionals wanted to give “theoretical” education only limited influence on the public relations field.

The dichotomy between theory and practice may be particularly problematic for public relations in Europe, where some countries do divide their institutions of higher learning according to these two categories. Some institutions are purely theoretical; others strictly vocational (Culbertson, 2004, p. 130). But the divide between theory and practice persists in the United States as well. Since public relations worldwide is heavily influenced by standards in the United States and the United Kingdom—especially through the use of Anglo textbooks (Ekachai & Komolsevin, 1998; Moss & DeSanto, 2002)—it is imperative that cultural biases such as the division between theory and practice be explored for the enhancement of the field overall.

This article attempts to situate public relations education more broadly, suggesting ways to implement a *praxis perspective* to the teaching of public relations. I use praxis in the Aristotelian sense: praxis is *theory-informed practice*. There are a number of reasons why praxis-oriented public relations education is important in the current historical moment, not the least of which is the aforementioned dearth of pedagogical research on public relations in

general. A more important reason lies in the necessity of bridging two gaps: between theory and practice, but also between professionals and academics. In order to produce the next generation of leadership in public relations, Communication programmes—especially those based in the humanities—must focus their concerns on developing in their students both theoretical sophistication and work-related capability. The integration of theory and practice into *praxis* may help to determine the future not only of the public relations field, but also of ethical public discourse. The question of praxis in public relations education presents humanities-based degree programmes with a peculiar challenge. Educators want to fulfil the value of a broad-based education in philosophy and rhetoric, while at the same time preparing students for the marketplace. Obviously in public relations there are industry-specific practices that students must learn (Napoli, Taylor, & Powers, 1999).

This article seeks pragmatic ways of educating future public relations leaders in praxis, addressing praxis as an orientation that can assist pedagogical implementations in three areas. First, the medium of the classroom may be constructed into a “message” about professional civility when course communication mirrors that of a public relations firm rather than a traditional classroom. Second, public relations can be readily linked to lived experience in the world, particularly in the study of civic engagement. Third, public relations campaign practices may be approached as “exercises in rhetorical form,” dependent on broad-based knowledge of human persuasion. From these areas, this article works to discern implications for public relations pedagogy and practice, especially in humanities-based public relations programs. Before launching into these points, the question must be answered: Why is praxis such an important orientation for public relations pedagogy?

### **The Humanities, Rhetoric, and PR**

Public relations educators recently described public relations in the academy as being “at a critical juncture”; public relations is often

described as a “field in crisis”. In the US, public relations is a pivot point for the emerging discipline of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) education—because public relations incorporates aspects of marketing while singularly opening up different avenues of action in communication.

One of these avenues is dialogic communication. Unlike advertising, public relations practices ought to beg dialogue—and dialogic practices are at the heart of the public relations pedagogy advocated in this article. Even those within the communication field often underestimate the public importance of public relations. While the nexus of public discourse was once constituted by single speakers addressing the masses, Sproule (2002) has pointed out that those who manage mass media—including public relations practitioners—are now far more powerful rhetorically than those whom Quintilian once called “the good man speaking well”. For Sproule (2002), the essence of contemporary public discourse lies not in speeches but in managed mass media. Davis (2002) agrees, noting that public relations today is central to community discourse, and its significance follows an upward trajectory.

There is at least one notable case that suggests Davis and Sproule are correct. In September 2002, when White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card was asked why Iraq was suddenly on the President’s agenda, he replied: “From a marketing point of view, you don’t launch new products in August” (Meyer, 2002). And the nexus of community discourse and public relations is by no means limited to politics. The simple example of Andrew Card’s comment can be juxtaposed with any number of similar cases. Such everyday observations may compel the academy (and the general public) to understand that the centre of public discourse—of rhetoric—in the West has shifted from public speaking to public relations and other mass media communication forms. In the past, many Americans may have been persuaded by wartime messages that the President delivered in a single speech via radio or television. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by contrast, the President’s messages are strategically managed through many *other* media—not just the public address.

Indeed, it is the agenda-setting function of the news media that drives public discourse—not the single speech events of the federal government. Card’s comment suggests that rhetoric is far more complex and that governing practices are far more dependent on media management and other marketing forms.

If this be the case, then rhetorical theorists and critics would do well to shift their attention also. But this academic shift has yet to occur on a broad scale. For example, at the disciplinary level in the United States, the introductory course closest to rhetoric in communication departments is public speaking, not public relations. Academics in the US still believe that public speaking is *central* to participation in a democratic republic, even though the dominant mode of rhetoric is more accurately characterised as public relations. Furthermore, few rhetorical scholars teach public relations, preferring courses in the neighbourhood of rhetorical history, theory, criticism, and culture. When rhetoricians approach rhetorical practices, they are more likely to consider issues from theoretical or critical perspectives rather than at the level of practice or application—or prescriptive rhetoric according to the rhetorical tradition. For example, in the past quarter-century, social movement theory and criticism have made significant contributions and generated many popular courses within rhetorical studies, and modern social movements have consistently and consciously employed sophisticated public relations methods. Nevertheless, rhetorical scholars and teachers tend to ignore public relations as a contemporary rhetorical art.

Since public speaking has been a hallmark of American speech and communication departments for nearly a century, it is not difficult to understand why many “purist” rhetoricians could be reluctant to learn and teach contemporary public relations as rhetoric. Combine this commonplace academic inertia with an equally common academic disdain for the marketplace, and the dilemma is clear. Sproule (2002) and Davis (2002) are more forward thinking than many of their colleagues. Rhetoric in the “real world” has shifted, but rhetorical education has not.

This article suggests ways to bridge this gap between rhetorical practices and rhetorical education, by reframing them as public relations practices and public relations education. As a public rhetorical practice, one can make a compelling case that public relations commands the broadest range of public discourse in today's world. But in the world of academia, we can account for the recalcitrance to the notion of theorizing and teaching public relations from a rhetorical perspective according to at least two major factors. First, intra-disciplinary boundaries established in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century defined public relations as an area of applied communication. This definition has led to a tendency to teach and practice public relations from a behaviourist perspective. In some extreme cases, public relations has even been approached as mass psychology rather than persuasive communication. The work of Edward Bernays (which set an early direction for public relations education and practice in the US) is one example.

The second reason for a lack of clear rhetorical perspective in public relations education concerns the ideological predispositions of contemporary rhetorical theorists. They have not been hospitable to public relations because of its association with status quo politics and economics (see the quote from Andrew Card described above). Therefore, no matter how compelling the case may be that most rhetorical activity today is connected in some way to public relations patterns and practices, rhetoricians have kept their distance from teaching and scholarship overtly connected to Public Relations.

The kind of praxis-oriented teaching advocated in this article will depend on a new humanities framework for public relations. Praxis is a hallmark of humanities education, reaching as far back as Aristotle's definition of praxis as theory-informed practice. The behaviourist model works differently than a praxis orientation, with potential shortcomings. In behaviourism there is the inherent philosophical problem of most behaviourist studies—people observing the actions of people (Grunig & White, 1992). The research conditions alone compound the ethical issues

involved. But behaviourist assumptions are not the only important set of assumptions involved in public relations research and practice. Practitioners and scholars also hold assumptions about ethics, social discourse, and civic engagement. Such assumptions fit squarely into the humanities, where rhetoric resides as the practical art concerned with human persuasion. In this historical moment, the possibility is open for humanities-based public relations that would value understanding, dialogue, and free will. Public relations educators prepare the future leaders of business. It makes sense to introduce students to the options they will have as leaders: to take public relations into a more human and ethical realm, or to uphold the status quo.

The engagement with values of dialogue for public relations begins with dialogue in the classroom. This article can now move into a discussion of practical ways to engage praxis with students in public relations programmes. The practical steps are threefold. First, the medium of the classroom may be transformed through attention to messages and channels that demonstrate contextual public relations practices. Second, public relations can be reframed as civic engagement in line with Bakhtinian discourse theories. Third, public relations skills may be approached as “exercises in rhetorical form”. Theoretical and practical ideas for all three of these points are addressed below, starting with “The medium is the message”.

### **The medium is the message**

“The medium is the message” is a famous phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan, but it has often been misunderstood. McLuhan elaborates: the medium is the message “is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Although the classroom is not new, it is important to think about the classroom as an extension of the human beings within it—both students and

professors. Within that environment, as with all extensions, McLuhan might warn that

we tend to focus on the obvious. In doing so, we largely miss the structural changes in our affairs that are introduced subtly, or over long periods of time. ...[A]fter a long period of time and experience with the [technology—in this case, the classroom—], we look backward and realize that there were some... “unanticipated consequences” (Federman, 2004, para 3).

In higher education—particularly within the public relations curriculum—unanticipated consequences may include the corporatization of the university. This manifests in the attitudes of the students, for example. In the United States, many students have come to see themselves as customers paying for straight As. As a result of a foolhardy combined focus on student self-esteem and electronic technology, the structure of many public relations classrooms has subtly emphasised practice over theory. How can classroom experiences move practice to praxis? That is the question of this article.

McLuhan suggests, “Control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it. Anticipation gives the power to deflect and control force” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 199). This conscious anticipation was the project of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, based in large part on McLuhan’s idea. One of the primary tenets of teaching for Postman and Weingartner is to transcend subject matter, which they accurately term “trivia”, and instead create learning environments for students that are intensely rich. If any learning is to be gained at all, it must be contained within an inspiring message, and it ought to be communicated through a medium with profound openness of meaning. Teachers and students do this together; meanings emerge between them in what Arnett (1992) terms dialogic education.

As Postman and Weingartner write:

As soon as students realize that their lessons are about their meanings, then the entire ... context of schools is different. Learning is no longer a contest between them and something outside of them [such as how to do public relations campaigns]. There is, then, no need for the kinds of “motivation” found in the conventional Trivia content. ... It makes both possible and acceptable a plurality of meanings... And this is the basis of the process of learning how to learn, how to deal with the otherwise “meaningless,” how to cope with change that requires new meanings to be made (1969, p. 97).

In the current moment, this last point—how to cope with change that requires new meanings to be made—is just as salient now as it was 35 years ago. This is particularly true for the future professionals public relations academics wish to educate. For helpful messages to be created in an integrated marketing classroom, the media must mirror the message. Indeed, the medium *is* the message: how the instructor communicates knowledge is just as important as the knowledge itself. Used properly, the medium can reinforce the message.

For one example, consider the messages public relations students should hear at the start of any given semester. In any average college course, a syllabus spells out these messages clearly and effectively. But what if public relations professors could do better? What if they incorporated the very goals of the course into their own communication? The professor could be a model of the very kind of communication she wanted to teach. Is a syllabus a primary medium for employee relations in public relations? Obviously not. But a newsletter might be, and the subject matter of a syllabus is easily translated into one (see **Appendix A, embedded below**).



Not only does this newsletter contain all the messages necessary for a well-managed course, but it also illustrates—from the very first day of the class—the kind of communication a public relations practitioner produces. For example, the newsletter in Appendix A consciously uses different types of lead sentences throughout the newsletter, one in each story. One offers a statistic, another begins with a quote, another asks a direct question, and another tells a story. At least one story in this example is also tailored to the audience in a very specific way by alluding to one of the heroes of American football, Jerome Bettis.

Everything the professor does needs to form a conscious medium of effective, ethical public relations. The professor can use the syllabus as a lesson on the first day of class to introduce ideas about rhetoric. Not only are students thinking about specific public relations practices (such as a newsletter), but they also stay focused on the links between public relations practices and their own lived experience. The syllabus is not presented as separate from rhetoric. The medium attempts to work against a false divide between academic theory and professional practices.

While “school” and “the real world” are one false dichotomy students sometimes experience, another is the false divide between classical rhetorical theory and 21<sup>st</sup> century technology. In a praxis-oriented public relations classroom, assignments should strive for optimum connection between ongoing lived experience and the contemporary world. In other words, students should be prepared to notice and discuss the implications of technology—a key part of Postman and Weingartner’s project that I described above. Information technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century provides many temptations for unreflective communication.

The praxis-oriented public relations classroom can help students engage questions about technology through certain projects. In

the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) major at Duquesne University, students are given historically based case studies for a term assignment. Students are assigned a year, a client, and an exigency (usually a public relations crisis or challenge). They must research, plan, and pitch a public relations campaign to their client using *only* the technology that would have been available during the assigned historical period. When students are thinking about 18<sup>th</sup> century Federalist Papers or the 1931 uprisings on Cyprus, they explore the possibility that Internet advertising and PowerPoint presentations are somewhat extraneous to human persuasion. They are merely “exercises in rhetorical form”.

Some educators in the public relations field, notably Dr Rochelle Larkin Ford at Howard University in Washington, DC, have also introduced field-specific media into their courses in public relations. Ford recommends that professors apply what they know as public relations knowledge-workers to the public relations classroom, before the course even begins (2003, p. 9). For instance, she introduces the simple yet novel idea of researching the various student publics within the classroom. In addition, she emphasises that the course should be flexible enough to change, much like a public relations campaign.

### **Organizations, Culture, and Values: Civic Engagement**

It is a fine line educators walk, however—particularly with students in business—because the “flexibility” Ford (2003) advocates can too often become a power-struggle between professor and students. Indeed, Arnett (1992) writes in *Dialogic Education* that many years after Postman and Weingartner wrote their book advocating the medium as a message, a better title given the current state of higher education might be *Teaching as a Subservient Activity* (Arnett, 1992). So, part of what professors need to communicate is not merely the practical and theoretical aspects of the field of public relations, but also the professional and ethical responsibilities it invites. This is the second part of teaching public relations from a praxis

perspective: integrating lived experience and engaging cultural values. To understand the urgency of this imperative, one need look no further than the observation made earlier in this article—that public relations and other media communication have emerged as the dominant forms of public discourse. Two of the cultural values that can be built into the integrated marketing classroom are based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s paradigm of the dialogic. These two values are social coordination and civic engagement.

For Bakhtin, all dialogue emerges in a particular fashion because of the specific social interrelationships in which it occurs. No item of discourse stands in isolation, nor is it the product of a single speaker and his or her intentions. It is only created through the dynamics of the relationship, between what has been said and will be said. As Bakhtin asserts:

Not a single instance of verbal utterance can be reckoned exclusively to its utterer’s account. Every utterance is *the product of the interaction between speakers* and the product of the broader context of the whole complex *social situation* in which the utterance emerges... [It] derives shape and meaning in all its most essential aspects not from the subjective experiences of the speaker but from the social situation in which the utterance appears (1987, p. 41, emphasis in original).

This reordering of the nature of dialogue, quite radical for Bakhtin’s historical moment, leaves no question as to the problematic nature of the asymmetrical public relations that emerged in the West just a few decades later. The behaviourist perspective discussed earlier in this article can be contrasted with Bakhtin’s view that all communication is constituted through social interdependence.

Since all discourse is the product of social interaction, it makes sense that Bakhtin’s sense of the dialogic should be helpful to ideas in

this article about civic engagement. Social interaction occurs in the everyday life of the marketplace and within the public discourse of citizens; thus, civic engagement creates even more potential for dialogism, with myriad social interactions occurring within those contexts. Bakhtin railed against the Enlightenment notion that civic life necessitated unanimity, however. He argued that public discourse may be built on “a plurality of consciousnesses,... [This plurality] is, so to speak, by its very nature *full of event potential* and is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 81, emphasis in the original).

It is interesting to note that Bakhtin wrote these words in an analysis of Dostoevsky. Bakhtin describes the artist as having potential mastery over another person by creating a visual plastic image of him/her. This dynamic between artist and figure seems much like the Bernaysian view of marketing: one seeks mastery over the public in asymmetrical corporate communication. Dostoevsky, in Bakhtin’s view, redeems the artistic image by focusing on voice rather than image, much in the way that dialogic corporate communication can focus on civic engagement. To engage this value in the classroom, one can put dialogic theory into practice with students. One example is the mid-term performance review in a public relations course (see **Appendix B, embedded below**), which provides feedback to students about their work in the context of the classroom as a marketing firm.



Students are evaluated on social coordination and civic engagement with their peers, in the categories of job knowledge, communication, professionalism, leadership, and work performance. Goal recommendations are made as well, but not before the five categories of civic engagement have been discussed first.

This placement of dialogic teaching practices within the context of Bakhtin's civic engagement is useful for public relations and IMC courses, because the marketplace was particularly interesting for Bakhtin as a site of civic engagement. In his writings on Rabelais' medieval reflections, he notes: "The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained 'with the people'" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 213). For Rabelais, social interaction in the marketplace reflected a kind of utopia: an equalizing and possibly democratic *dialogism* (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 220).

It remains to be seen, in the present historical moment, if such civic engagement has not become permanently monologic as the realm of public discourse has shifted from rhetorical to managerial and mediated practices. In other words, can dialogue characterise 21<sup>st</sup> century public discourse—including the public discourse of higher education?

One can be optimistic about the answer, if social coordination and civic engagement might once again be privileged as social values. Isobel Parke, senior counsel at Jackson Jackson & Wagner in Boston, stresses that civic engagement beyond our own communities is necessary: "Success in global public relations will come to students who make the effort to understand and respect national and regional cultures on a three-dimensional basis: symbolic history, present values, and future aspirations" (Parke, 2003, p. 16). One of the intended consequences of the changed medium of a dialogic, value-specific marketing classroom would, it is hoped, be a student re-orientation to more global ways of thinking.

This article endorses global ways of thinking as well. While Anglo-Saxon (US and UK) public relations is privileged in the present work, this is because of the broad influence these cultures have on public relations worldwide. Public relations classrooms in all countries should devise culturally specific ways of teaching public relations from a praxis perspective. Public relations should also be placed in context, alongside other communication courses such as intercultural and

interpersonal communication (Ekachai & Komolsevin, 1998). To engage Parke's (2003) symbolic history, noted above, one helpful assignment in Western cultures might be an historically based public relations campaign. In this project, students are given a particular historical event or past product launch that they must manage strategically. The year, client, and exigency are given as parameters. They must research the historical moment and provide a full public relations campaign, using *only* the technology and acceptable public relations practices of the assigned time period. Recent examples at Duquesne University in the United States included such diverse assignments as the 1931 riots on Cyprus and the 1988 Alar hoax. In this way, students learn about the development of the public relations field and about rhetorical praxis. Of course, rhetorical praxis is at the heart of this article's consideration of public relations pedagogy in humanities-based communication programs. The next section examines public relations "skills" as "exercises in rhetorical form".

### **Exercises in Rhetorical Form**

Yet another one of the symbolic values of the classroom "culture" professors can create for future public relations professionals is that rhetoric matters, and that communication must be careful and responsible. Parke, quoted above, would probably agree that such care is direly needed at this moment in history. The introduction to this article focused on the tendency to perceive a gap between theory and practice. It is hoped that the orientation toward praxis alleviates this problem, yet it is still natural for students to ask anxiously at the beginning of a course: "We *are* going to learn how to write a media release, right?" Their question is vital: this is a skill they need to have to work in public relations. At the same time, "learning how" ought not to be an easy answer—it ought to beg questions of 2,300 years of rhetorical theory, beginning with Aristotle. One way to teach communication skills, then, is to reorient them from "learning how to write" to "exercising rhetorical form".

One way to think about the additive value of humanities rhetoric when juxtaposed with behaviourist perspectives is through a return to basic questions about praxis. The main concern of a behaviourist might be, “Did this public relations tactic work?” On the other hand, a rhetorician could potentially ask, “Why did it work (or not work)?”. Basing his thinking on Aristotle, Smudde (2005) suggests public relations professionals consider the difference between “knowledge” and “right opinion”. Right opinion might be thought of as situated in the social sciences; by employing right opinion, a public relations practitioner achieves what is needed based on past experiences. Using “knowledge”, on the other hand, a rhetorically educated public relations practitioner would be privy to the inner workings of details behind how “what is needed” has been achieved. The goal then is to bring together knowledge and right opinion to add value from a strategic management perspective (Smudde, 2005). This kind of framing ought to appeal to practitioners interested in “skills” as well as academics interested in the higher order thinking required of future leaders in public relations.

Of course, the rhetorical tradition is vast and a summation of it is far beyond the scope of this article. By the term “rhetoric”, however, I do not merely mean “persuasion”. The following paragraphs attempt to provide a broad yet incisive context for presenting public relations techniques as exercises in rhetorical form. There is a solid foundation for this practice in public relations pedagogy, since there has been a good deal of theorizing about rhetoric and public relations over the last 20 years—in the United States as well as other areas of the globe. Some describe this scholarly effort as beginning with Crable and Vibbert (1985), who emphasised the role of publics in determining important issues for organizations. Indeed, organizational communication has often been linked with rhetoric in this line of public relations scholarship. Courtwright (2005) speculates that because of current efforts by scholars in Australia and New Zealand to study public relations and organizational culture, those interested in rhetoric are poised for a “bigger explosion” in the significance of rhetorical

analysis for public relations (Courtwright, 2005).

Indeed, to do justice to the potential of public relations to influence other areas of communication, one need not omit other scholarship that does not explicitly situate itself in rhetoric. One recent important study for humanities-based public relations pedagogy is Woodward’s (2003) description of a “critical-practical” approach to public relations. In such an approach “meaning-making” or the co-creation of dialogue is permitted between and within disciplines, approaches, teachers and students. While the critical approach alone tends to dismiss dialogue because it privileges the voice of the critic, the critical-practical approach allows the interrogation of control while at the same time locating the nexus of practical meaning. As Woodward explained:

The practical-critical perspective accounts for how material circumstances, language resources, and the quality of relations among participants can affect individuals’ and social groups’ ability to exercise active, situated participation (2003, p. 413).

Implicit in this quote is Woodward’s concern with reconciling interpretivist and instrumentalist approaches in public relations scholarship, a concern that corresponds with efforts in this article to bring together theory and practice into a praxis perspective. However, Woodward takes rhetoric even further in the practical-critical approach by engaging dialectic—a significant component of rhetorical study since Aristotle. In Woodward’s model, the tension is presented between planning and action—where, from a practical-critical perspective, the linguistic, material, and interpersonal contexts are all brought to bear on the “co-creation” of public relations between organizations and their publics (Woodward, 2003). Such co-creation is certainly part of the rhetorical tradition in public relations, stemming from organizational communication, that a number of scholars have described in the history of the public relations field (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Courtwright, 2005).

Similarly, Ihlen (2002) lists some PR-specific uses of rhetorical theory, drawing on Aristotle, Quintilian, Cicero, Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin, Chaim Perelman, and Michael Sproule. But Ihlen also calls on scholars and practitioners to offer public evidence of the relationship between rhetoric and public relations. Like Woodward (2003), Ihlen asks for greater praxis-oriented attention to what he calls “symbolic and material dimensions” (Ihlen, 2002, p. 259). From a humanities perspective, it would be sufficient to show the potential of rhetoric—to envision things as they could be rather than as they are. However, this article will follow Ihlen’s suggestion here by offering one more example from a praxis-based public relations course.

The final assignment for this course in public relations practices is to critically evaluate one of the Silver Anvil Award winners from the past two years. The Silver Anvil Awards comprise the highest honours bestowed on public relations campaigns by the Public Relations Society of America. But there is a saying in marketing that you can often win the creativity award, and still lose the account. Certainly one can point to daily examples in experiences of advertising: the audience loves the commercial; it makes them laugh and cry and shout for joy; now, what was it exactly they’re supposed to buy? Often, the Silver Anvil Awards mirror this process. The public relations plan may be brilliant; perhaps it had never been done before; it showed the best of “thinking outside the box”. But did the campaign really forge a dialogic relationship with multiple publics? Was it even planned so that it could do so?

This last question is very important for students to answer, because one of the most crucial building blocks of rhetoric is planning (Herrick, 2000). More importantly, if the campaign was not strategically planned, the “theory” element of praxis is missing. To emphasise this orientation to the students, the public relations firm that was once the classroom decides to offer an award for the best public relations campaign. However, judging criteria stem from all the planning steps advocated by public relations theorists and professionals. The students are each given the brief plansbook from a Silver Anvil Award-winning entry, and they are asked to write an extensive report on the plansbook’s attention to each of the nine steps of a public relations campaign. The class has named the award after Ronald Smith, the author of their theoretically rich text (Smith, 2002). Each student decides whether or not they can recommend their entry for a “Smitty” or not. Typically, most campaigns fall short because of the failure to research publics efficiently, or to conduct evaluative research. So, in answer to Ihlen’s (2002) call for concrete examples of rhetoric in public relations, the students are beginning to offer proof that planned rhetoric works best. In other words, they engage praxis.

## **Conclusion**

In completing the assignments described in this article, students begin to understand that effective public relations practices are always processual and contextual. The efforts of their instructor may be to mirror the practices of a public relations firm. As one initial reviewer of the abstract for this article pointed out, this is an ideal that can often fall prey to “expediency”—the pressures of a “real” public relations firm can belie the call to professionalism in a simulated environment. Once again Woodward’s (2003) theoretical stance is helpful in this regard. As he noted, public relations techniques “are distilled from complex, situated histories of discursive and material practices, rather than serving as ‘atomic’ units of action” (Woodward, 2003, p. 413). Thus the historical campaign I described in an earlier section,

coupled with the close analysis of planning in a Silver Anvil campaign, may help students to engage public relations praxis as a more gestalt undertaking than they would normally experience.

Moreover, Woodward (2003) reminds us that “cooperation emerges temporally amidst changing, contingent circumstances and variable interpretations” (p. 418). This *cooperation* includes the inner workings of the classroom itself—the media, the message, the exercises, the civic engagement, and the rhetoric. Part of the impetus behind this article is to consider such “contingent circumstances and variable interpretations” reflectively. Again we come back to a simple rhetorical proposition: if such classroom activities work, how do “knowledge” and lived experience combine to provide direction for the professionalisation and praxis orientation of the public relations field?

While the examples in this article are somewhat narrow, it is hoped the general points have not been lost. As Sprague (1993) noted, more scrutiny and passionate dialogue about pedagogical practices will improve the field. Because public relations is so significant to public life in the current historical moment, the implications of public relations praxis transcends mere classroom outcomes. Still, there are basic starting points for better public relations pedagogy from a praxis perspective.

In any classroom, the medium is the message: whether marketing classes might be “changed” into marketing firms, public speaking classes into public forums, or technology courses into chat rooms. The underlying spark of human creativity can be accelerated through an inspiring medium. In all cases, one should be concerned with the way teaching reflects and/or enhances social values, including civic engagement.

Finally, exercising rhetorical form in the classroom ought to reorient lectures, free students from rigid constructs, and move education toward a more noticeable recognition of the larger human experience. A praxis perspective removes the false dichotomy of theory and practice and creates instead a dynamic environment for the exchange of ideas,

for better public discourse, and for a move toward dialogue.

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