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# Collaborative curriculum development in public relations: Applying Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)

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## Abstract

*This paper uses Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) to interpret the experience of an academic and an academic development advisor working together on the high-pressure development of new public relations curriculum. SFBT is a counselling approach focused on helping people make improvements in relation to given problems. In an academic development setting, it provides a framework for considering the way collaborative relationships can operate in the process of building curricula and enhanced teaching practices. In the case discussed here, a teaching academic and an academic development advisor found that SFBT provided a useful model for reflection on an extended collaboration. The paper proposes SFBT as a potentially valuable tool for academics and their advisors in other curriculum projects.*

## Introduction

Universities and other tertiary education institutions face continuing pressure to maintain curriculum currency, including developing new programmes, as they respond to shifting interpretations of ‘what the market wants’ and demands to inform teaching with the latest research. Continuous improvement of teaching practice is another key element in ensuring that curricula remain attractive to students. While many academics act in isolation to juggle the demands for currency and change, most can call if they wish on centrally-based support in curriculum development. This often takes the form of generic educational training (Brew, 2007) offered with the aim of advancing the university’s strategic goals for student retention

and recruitment. Rarely is ongoing one-on-one support available, despite evidence that close collaboration is effective, and academics welcome it (Roche, 2001).

Our experience suggests that it is often considered a luxury for academic development staff to be able to work closely with individual academics throughout the entire curriculum development process. This paper reports the outcome of a collaboration between a lecturer and an academic developer who had this opportunity, because of a pressing need to quickly develop a foundation unit for a new public relations programme. It links the different facets of the ongoing relationship to the multi-layered models in the SFBT approach, borrowed from psychotherapy (Devlin, 2006). SFBT was found to be a useful means of reflecting on the collaborative effort, which is now extending from its original focus to encompass new public relations unit development. Given that collaboration of our kind may not be available to everyone, we also propose a model where an individual academic working in isolation can still employ aspects of SFBT in their work.

## SFBT

Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) is a type of therapy used in counselling to help clients focus on making appropriate and achievable improvements to a particular problem. It was developed as a means of making therapy “briefer, more goal orientated, and more pragmatic” (Visser, 2008, p. 1), and

originated in the USA during the 1980s, predominantly from Berg and De Shazer (described in Visser, 2008). Since then, SFBT has been widely used in counselling as a short-term therapy focusing on finding solutions and achieving goals, rather than centred on exploring problems (Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000).

SFBT's key philosophy is the emphasis on solutions. Perkins (1999) identifies four foundational principles:

1. Meet the client at his/her model of the world: let them decide on the goals.
2. Transform the client from being a complainant to being a customer, i.e. someone who recognises the benefits of actively participating in the therapy.
3. Focus on the end solution (use the 'miracle question' approach).
4. If the client is happy – then go no further, i.e. respect the wishes of the client.

Berg and Miller (1992) introduced the concept of the 'miracle question':

Suppose that one night, while you are asleep, there is a miracle and the problem that brought you here is solved. However, because you are asleep, you don't know that the miracle has already happened. When you wake up in the morning, what will be different that will tell you that the miracle has taken place? (Berg & Miller, 1992, p. 13, cited in Perkins, 1999, para. 18).

The miracle question can be used to focus the client's attention on the future, and on a possible solution to their problems (Perkins, 1999).

While SFBT has been developed as a counselling therapy, recent papers by Devlin (2003; 2006) point out that the same approach can be used in non-therapeutic settings, and in particular, is especially well-suited for academic development in teaching. Devlin notes that:

The use of [a] solution-based approach in individual university teaching development is primarily concerned not with problems in teaching and learning, but instead with solutions. The primary focus is firmly on improvement (2006, p. 103).

The key features of SFBT are that the academic is recognised as the expert in their own discipline and circumstances and therefore the best person to identify where improvements are required in their teaching; and that the primary focus is on improvements (Devlin, 2006). SFBT helped us to identify that the key themes of our collaboration could be thought of in terms of each of the categories covered by the theory, with the emphasis shifting in line with the changing dynamics of our collaboration.

### **Background**

LPR100 Professional Communication Practice was a new unit (with the first cohort of students in 2007), offered to first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Business, Bachelor of Communications and Bachelor of Social Science programmes in the Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale, at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. While broad learning objectives and assessment items had been created as part of the internal unit accreditation process, these were sufficiently open-ended to allow a different teaching approach. The unit was developed and taught by a new staff member who was able to start work only six weeks before the semester began. A similar unit, taught at the university's city campus, was available as a model; however, the academic's approach to the new unit was sufficiently different as to warrant a full development programme. The main objective of LPR100 was to provide a broad introduction to business communication. A key sub-goal was to provide a foundation for students intending to major in public relations studies. Development of a new unit was seen as an excellent opportunity not only to introduce innovative teaching and assessment approaches, but also, it was hoped,

to distinguish the Swinburne course from similar offerings elsewhere.

LPR100 adopts a broad-brush approach to introducing professional business communication concepts and associated skills, in recognition that communication expertise is fundamental to a range of disciplines, not just public relations. public relations as a form of professional communication is introduced against a backdrop of other business communication activities that may form part of a public relations practitioner's work, such as researching, writing and presenting information with a given client's needs in mind. These topics are themes that thread throughout the course. They are examined both as generic business communication practices and as public relations practices.

The unit is taught predominantly face-to-face, and is structured around a single 90 minute weekly lecture, plus a 90 minute tutorial session, held in groups of about 25 students. A larger-than-expected enrolment in the first iteration (about 200 students) meant that eight tutorial sessions were scheduled, several of these running concurrently. Designing the LPR100 curriculum included writing appropriate assessment tasks (aligned with the learning objectives and staggered throughout semester to allow for maximum feedback opportunities), and the writing of structured learning activities for weekly tutorial sessions, again co-ordinated with the learning objectives, the lectures, and assessment. Assessment rubrics were developed for all assessment items, including weekly tutorial activities. An associated online site was developed in Blackboard (the university's learning management system), which included discussion forums, links to resources and interesting web sites, and an end-of-semester test.

Swinburne University provides academic development support at several levels, one of which is making available a faculty-based academic developer (termed an ADA, or Academic Development Advisor) to help staff

with various aspects of their teaching. Given the short timelines involved for the development of LPR 100, the ADA worked very closely with the academic leader on most aspects of the unit development, as detailed in subsequent sections.

Both the academic leader and the ADA felt strongly that they wanted to design a course that was highly engaging and motivating for students (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) with activities and assessment tasks aligned closely with the learning objectives (Biggs, 2003) and in line with the institution's emphasis on career-oriented learning outcomes. The intense development environment and the fact that the institution was breaking new ground (public relations had not been offered before) meant that LPR100 would be something of a 'pilot project'. Therefore, both the academic and the ADA concluded that formative evaluation of the unit was required during semester in order to allow immediate responses if the need arose.

### **Curriculum development**

Development of the LPR 100 unit began with the academic leader clearly identifying his philosophy, which was to ensure alignment with the Swinburne University focus on career-orientated learning and real world application, by giving students sufficient opportunities to develop and practice their professional communication skills. As the unit was designed to lead into further studies, particularly in PR, components specific to the public relations discipline were incorporated as 'tasters' of public relations concepts.

Development of LPR100 began with the academic leader reviewing the learning objectives in the accreditation documentation, then preparing clearer learning objectives for the unit as a whole. Specific learning objectives were then prepared for each of the 12 weekly topics. An example of weekly learning objectives is below:

At the end of Topic Five, you should be able to:

1. Describe two ways of researching an audience's existing level of knowledge of a subject, their opinions about it, the ways members receive information, and how best to recruit that knowledge to the task of designing effective professional communication.

2. Discuss how to search for and evaluate information on the Internet and in the library, especially in electronic databases accessed through the library catalogue.

3. Explain the three main approaches to considering ethical questions, and their relevance to professional communication.

Clearly identifying objectives for each week meant that it was then relatively easy to prepare a lecture and tutorial activities to help students achieve those objectives. This process also meant that activities and assessment tasks were closely connected with the overall learning objectives (Biggs, 2003). This unit was developed adopting a real-world experiential approach. To incorporate this, an active learning environment within lectures and tutorial classes was encouraged. All lectures were prepared by the academic leader, who then consulted the ADA for critical feedback. While primarily delivered using PowerPoint, all lectures made frequent use of images, video clips and questions, to act as triggers for class discussion. The design of the lectures attempted to include examples from youth culture and from topical issues. The lecturer actively encouraged students to discuss and debate the issues raised. While some were initially taken aback at being invited to contribute, not just listen, they soon adjusted.

Tutorial sessions were similarly interactive, and again, used a variety of media. Since students taking LPR100 are mostly in their first year at university, tutorial classes were quite structured, especially early in semester. Students were provided with handouts for each

tutorial session, which set out the questions or topics, and provided instructions on whether this was a task to be completed individually, in pairs or as a larger group. The handouts also included details of the criteria – marking rubrics – used by tutors to assess the students' participation that week. This allowed the teaching staff to convey their expectations of the level of contribution required to gain full marks, and ensured transparency of the marking process. A similar marking strategy was also used with the major assessment items. This was the first experience with the use of rubrics for all the teaching team, and was considered important to ensure consistency of marking across a team with diverse teaching experiences.

All assessment was conducted during the teaching term – there is no final exam for LPR100. **Table 1** (over the page) details the breakdown of assessment:

The major assessment activities were designed to give students sufficient opportunities to practice oral presentations, report writing, and researching information – considered key areas of professional communication. Details of the marking criteria were provided to students before they submitted their work, again with the aim of clearly setting out the expectations of the standard expected and to ensure students understood how their work would be graded (Moskal, 2000). The ADA prepared draft rubrics based on the descriptions of the task provided by the academic leader, who then helped edit the rubrics before release to students.

**Table 1: Assessment tasks for LPR100**

Description	Weight	Topic	Due
Essay assignment	20%	Interpersonal communication	Week 4
Oral presentation	25%	Personal choice of subject matter	Presented weeks 6-7
Written report	25%	Professional report on given topic	Week 10
Tutorial activities, including capstone test in week 12	30%	Weekly activities related to lecture topics	3% most weeks, 6% capstone test

For the oral presentation component of the unit, students were required to deliver a brief talk (on a topic of free choice) to their fellow students. They were also required to provide feedback to their peers, in the form of a constructive critique. This peer-assessment was a new experience for all students, and focused not just on the aspects of providing positive yet critical feedback, but also on the receiving of such feedback. This particular activity (both the actual presentation and the peer-assessment) proved very popular with students.

### **Applying the SFBT models to curriculum development**

In the pressure-cooker development environment, the focus was on ‘doing’ rather than the reflection that hindsight has afforded. The central demand we made of ourselves was to take core curriculum content common to many business communication courses, to design the progression through the unit so that it served as an introduction to more detailed public relations studies, and to do this in a way that met our aspirations for a high level of student engagement. Using this as our

‘problem’ definition, we reviewed our collaboration. We identified SFBT as an appropriate theoretical lens to structure our consideration of the collaboration and its outcomes. Devlin’s discussions (2003, 2006) of applying SFBT in a context such as ours are based on one case study and the approach may not be applicable in all contexts. However, our view is that the key elements of the approach are sufficiently broad and generalisable as to offer value to other academics and educational development advisors.

In this next section, we apply SFBT to our curriculum development experience, using Brinko’s five models as discussion categories (Brinko, 1990; 1991). When used in academic development, SFBT typically consists of a series of consultations between an academic and a developer, with the developer applying one or more of five possible models (Brinko, 1990; 1991):

1. ‘Product’: supplying products as solutions to problems (eg. educational resources, arranging workshops).
2. ‘Prescription’: supplying advice (i.e. consultation).

3. 'Collaborative/Process': working as a partner with the academic to co-develop solutions.

4. 'Affiliative': focusing on personal problems, where these may impact on teaching.

5. 'Confrontational': taking on a 'devil's advocate' role to challenge the academic.

### **1. Product: supply of products as solutions to problems (eg. resources, workshops, etc)**

While the ADA did deliver some faculty-based group workshops on assessment strategies throughout the year, the timing of these was too late to be of use in the development of the LPR100 curriculum. Instead, one-on-one assistance was provided on a just-in-time basis, as the need arose. In several cases, this took the form of merely validating what the academic leader had already drafted (as he proved very adept at both writing learning objectives and aligning the assessment and content with these). The ADA provided examples of assessment rubrics to demonstrate how these might be useful, and helped to develop customised rubrics for each assessment task. The ADA also helped with the design of the associated online site in Blackboard, offered examples of appropriate welcome messages and site structure, and provided the technical expertise to develop and run the online capstone test at the end of the semester.

In many ways, the ADA fulfilled the role of the 'solution bank', which can include "any relevant resources and materials with ideas, suggestions and readings commonly used in academic development work" (Devlin 2006, p. 108).

### **2. Prescription: supply of advice (i.e. consultation)**

The role of the ADA throughout the entire curriculum development project was one of consultation, but as mentioned above, this often took the form of providing affirmation of the strategies and material already developed by

the lecturer, especially in his lecture material and delivery style. The ADA observed a lecture, and gave feedback on the lecturing style, delivery format, and venue. The ADA also advised on the tutorial activities, particularly at the start of semester, and appropriate assessment of them.

### **3. Collaborative/Process: working as a partner with the academic to co-develop solutions**

All meetings were conducted on an equal footing, and often as informal brainstorming sessions. Both found this valuable, as the meetings often quickly evolved into catalytic conversations that produced ideas for enhancing the student experience and structuring the academic's assessment and administrative processes. Respective roles were left to one side as both participants worked with a focus on outcomes rather than relative responsibilities and status.

### **4. Affiliative: focusing on personal problems, where these may impact on teaching**

Both the academic leader and the ADA were new employees of the institution at the start of this project, so both were still 'feeling their way' in their respective roles. As a result of the partnership relationship that developed, both collaborators were able to support each other through periods of self-doubt and high stress, juggling pressures from looming deadlines, demanding students, the pressures of the academic's ongoing doctoral thesis studies and all the other factors that impact on a person's work life. This facet of the collaboration may in fact turn out to be the major outcome – having a respected colleague provide reassurance at critical points can sometimes provide the stimulus necessary to keep going with a seemingly unachievable task. We did find that this was definitely a two-way process: each supported the other throughout, reflecting a shared view that effective collaboration is harboured through building relationships in non-judgemental partnerships.

## **5. Confrontational: taking on a devil's advocate role to challenge the academic**

This was often the ADA's most valuable contribution. She played the role of a student to challenge the practical implementation of particular strategies – for example, to work through how a student might read (and potentially misunderstand) tasks, what impact the scheduling of some tasks might have, and how a student might access some of the media examples utilised. At times, reigning in the academic's enthusiasm was an important aspect of the collaboration, in helping guard against simultaneously addressing too many dimensions of teaching at once (Devlin, 2006). This very pragmatic approach meant that the academic leader could focus on the higher-order learning outcomes he hoped his students could achieve, and depend on his ADA to help him operationalise them. These meetings were often great fun and highly rewarding, as both focused on the solutions – truly drawing on the key objectives of SFBT, confronting development issues, rather than (in this case) relationship difficulties.

### **Implementing evaluation**

A small evaluation project was undertaken during the development of LPR100, collecting feedback from both students and the teaching team (academic leader and tutors), to identify any areas that needed improvement for future deliveries of this unit. Key evaluation questions were identified before semester began, to assist with the development of appropriate evaluation methods:

1. Are the tutorial activities meeting our objectives, in providing the opportunity for students to engage with and explore the lecture topics?
2. Does the timing of the major assessment items (aligned with the relevant tutorial topics and staggered through semester) still give students sufficient feedback on their progress, in time to make changes if necessary?
3. Are the assessment rubrics useful in providing feedback to students, managing the

workload of markers, and in maintaining consistency across multiple markers?

The methods used included:

- A paper-based student questionnaire (administered during tutorial sessions, and asking for feedback on structure of tutorial activities, use of rubrics, feedback, etc, as well as suggestions for future improvements);
- Informal interviews with tutors (to gain feedback on student participation, opinions on how students are learning, and suggestions for future improvements);
- Unit convenor's assessment (feedback on the usefulness of rubrics, both personally and for maintaining consistency in marking by different tutors; and feedback on students' performance, both in tutorial sessions and in work submitted for major assessment), and
- Analysis of final marks and the percentage of students proceeding to next unit.

### **Results of evaluation**

Students were generally highly positive about the whole unit, with several students rating LPR100 as their favourite subject. Students particularly enjoyed the tutorial activities, especially those that involved group discussion, and the oral presentations were surprisingly popular, especially the giving and receiving of peer feedback. Those who attended lectures found the topics and the delivery interesting, but we were disappointed at the low attendance rate. Students reported dissatisfaction with some organisational issues, particularly around the oral presentations. With a large (n>200) student cohort to work with, these took three weeks of tutorial sessions to get through, instead of the scheduled two weeks.

Staff feedback was similar, in that staff enjoyed the interactive nature of the tutorial tasks, and first-time tutors particularly appreciated the assessment rubrics, which helped provide guidance and structure for their feedback to students. Tutors also provided some feedback to help improve these for future iterations.

This feedback from students is necessarily superficial – we were interested in ‘headline level’ responses, and were reluctant to make the task of gathering responses onerous for our students – first year students still grappling with starting at university. However, since this was the first iteration of this unit, we wanted to look at the salient features of the landscape rather than a detailed topography. Future evaluations will look at more detailed questions (for example, what specifically did students enjoy about, and gain from, the peer-assessment activity?).

### Discussion

The collaborators in this case have been (and are) strongly committed to the principle of assessing and evaluating innovation in academic development. It was in the process of reflecting on our experience that we discovered Devlin’s ground-breaking application of SFBT (2003, 2006) to the sorts of processes with which we were involved. There was immediate recognition that SFBT was an appropriate way of structuring and evaluating our collaboration in addition to other evaluations of student outcomes. In the academic setting, SFBT’s recognition of the academic as the expert in their own field was a foundation of our work, one without which our collaboration would not have reaped the results it did. It meant that the academic could feel safe about the evaluations undertaken, knowing that SFBT is “an approach that focuses on helping clients ‘construct solutions’ rather than ‘solve problems’” (Devlin, 2006, paraphrasing Gingerich & Eisengart, 2000).

A central aspect of the solution-finding process was the role of the academic developer in supporting the lecturer in operationalising his ideas. This usually meant helping him to identify a range of pathways through which his teaching and student learning objectives could be achieved. Part of this interaction involved both collaborators drawing on past experiences, relevant literature, and successful strategies

from similar courses, using the SFBT principle of using ‘what works’ (Devlin, 2006).

It is also interesting to compare the positive focus of SFBT with the Kaizen philosophy, adopted in many Japanese manufacturing contexts (Emil’ani, 2003). Briefly, Kaizen works on the principle of making improvements in lots of small steps, rather than a focus on making big improvements or great leaps forwards. Part of applying SFBT to academic development is applying this same principle that many small steps will take us further than looking for the elusive big steps. SFBT is focused on ‘what works’, so is a grounded approach that allows room for adjustments (for example, dropping things that don’t work).

Both curriculum development and implementation are often thought of in abstract terms, focused on the academic making the most efficient delivery to the students. All too little attention is paid to the human aspects of these activities. SFBT offers the opportunity to think about these processes, taking into account the needs of the individual academic, and by extension, our students.

SFBT may also provide a structure for academics who must perforce work alone to reflect on their own curriculum development and implementation, and who do not have the luxury of a one-on-one relationship with an academic developer. Because SFBT is focused on finding rapid routes to solutions (rather than on rectifying problems), using this approach may, we suggest, be more likely to minimise stress on the academic concerned in both of these areas (i.e. curriculum development and curriculum implementation). Feeling burdened by problems is highly stressful, and with a focus on solutions, using an SFBT-like approach may lift the emotional load, reminiscent of the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Academic life is pressured enough and hard-pressed academics need all the structured tools they can access.



**Table 2: Using the SFBT approach in isolation**

Model/category from Brinko (1990, 1991)	Example self-assessment questions
'Product': supplying products as solutions to problems (eg. educational resources, arranging workshops)	Have I accurately identified my needs? What products do I need, to help me achieve my goals?
'Prescription': supplying advice (i.e. consultation)	What advice do I need? Where can I go for this advice?
'Collaborative/Process': working as a partner with the academic to co-develop solutions	Is there someone I can discuss my ideas with? Is there someone who would be willing to collaborate with me more closely? (i.e. move out of my 'silo', seek interdisciplinary collaboration, mentoring schemes, etc). Can I reflect more on the processes – ask myself the miracle question?
'Affiliative': focusing on personal problems, where these may impact on teaching	What are my personal issues that may impact on my teaching/curriculum development? What are my limitations and (more importantly) my strengths?  Do I have a mentor I can talk to?
'Confrontational': taking on a 'devil's advocate' role to challenge the academic	Again, can I challenge myself? What are/will be my students' experiences? Can I put myself in the students' shoes to think through how they will approach/interpret/understand this unit?

With these ideas of structure and efficiency in mind, we have proposed a series of self-assessment questions for academic staff (Table 2), aligned with the five models proposed by Brinko (1990, 1991). It is not envisaged that each of these models is applicable in every situation; rather that an academic teacher can 'pick-and-choose' which aspects suit their current context, and use the suggested questions as a means of focusing their own attention on achieving goals.

Table 2 is proposed as our suggested framework for implementing an SFBT approach to academic development. These are initial reflections: we hope to extend them as our collaboration moves forward into more curriculum development for Swinburne's new public relations undergraduate programme. We acknowledge that our experience was largely positive and that some collaborations may be characterised by difficulties that we did not encounter. We recommend that both academics and their ADAs (or academic developers) consider using SFBT as a structure within which to explore possible dimensions of a collaborative project even before it is embarked upon. In this way, respective roles and expectations can be structured and a basis of mutual respect clearly established at the outset.

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