
Greening the public relations curriculum: An integrative approach to teaching environmental communication best practices in the campaigns course

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Abstract

In today's expanding green marketplace, public relations practitioners will be responsible for providing reliable information, sound analysis, and ethical recommendations on sustainability communication; yet most will have had no environmental education. As publics and organisations go green, ethical and pragmatic issues associated with environmental communication present challenges for the public relations professional. This paper makes a case for an integrative approach to teaching environmental communication in the public relations campaigns course. Included is a discussion of the changes that were made to the campaigns courses including new learning objectives, additional content, and structural changes, as well as an example of a new assignment and revised assessment measures.

Introduction

Today, green has become big business. The total number of green products increased 76% from 2009 to 2010 with over 4,744 green products landing on the shelves of North American big box stores (Terra Choice, 2010, p. 11). The astounding growth in the number of these products may be in reaction to consumers looking for more environmentally friendly products. A survey from Information Resources in 2008 found that approximately half of American consumers now consider sustainability when selecting a product (Fawkes, 2008). Additionally, when a

company's environmental performance is perceived to be "desirable, proper or appropriate", it reduces "unsystematic risk" and can have a positive impact on stock values (Bansal & Clelland, 2004, p. 94). Bortee (2009) found that a company that is "responsibly addressing environmental concerns of key publics and communities" increases the public admiration of the organisation (p. 134). Environmental issues have become important to publics and thus important to organisations.

At the same time, people have become unsure of these messages. Consumers have a hard time discerning true claims from those that are just greenwashing (Terra Choice, 2010). According to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (2007), "greenwash (a portmanteau of green and whitewash) is a term that is used to describe the actions of a company, government, or other organization, which promotes positive environmental practices, whilst acting in a way that is opposite or does not adhere to the claim. It highlights a disconnect between aspiration and real world impacts" (p. 2). Terra Choice Environmental Marketing found that 95% of green product claims involved greenwashing (Terra Choice, 2010, p. 16). This issue is compounded by the fact there are no standardised green, or eco-labelling procedures (Dahl 2010; Stroud 2009). The confusion over green claims and widespread greenwashing may be a reason that Chatsworth Communication found that only 1% of opinion formers in the United Kingdom thought that "genuine concern for the environment" was the main reason that UK companies undertake green initiatives ("UK big business puts image," 2007, pg. 1).

With the growth of green has come the growth of green public relations. The students we have in class today will be asked by future clients to create green messages, develop green campaigns, and respond to the myriad environmental concerns of stakeholders. In short, today's public relations students will be practicing their craft in a communications environment that is characterised by "an increasing level of communications around [environmental] sustainability" (CIPR, 2007). Yet, most of our students will have no environmental education. A lack of knowledge in this area could cause them to commit greenwashing, not out of malice, but due to ignorance.

This paper discusses one possible way for public relations educators to address the need for more training and education in the area of environmental communication. Specifically, it makes a case for what we call the integrative approach, and details the way that we redesigned the traditional public relations campaigns course by incorporating the study of best practices in environmental communication into the course. In the first section, we discuss the integrative approach for incorporating the study of environmental communication into the campaigns course. In the second section, we discuss how environmental communication best practices were integrated into the course, and present some of the assignments and assessment materials that were created for the course. In the final section, we reflect on some of the challenges that we encountered, and discuss some of the successes that we enjoyed while teaching the course.

An integrative approach: Why the campaigns course

The need for education and guidance in environmental communication has not gone unnoticed. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in Professional Standards Advisory PS-12 (2009) stated that while "the United States appears to be entering a resurgence of concern and attention to environmental sensibility, sensitivity and

preservation, there is an equal and, perhaps, accelerating use of environmentally friendly endorsements, which may be inaccurate, exaggerated or completely unfounded" (PRSA, 2009, p. 1). The organisation urges practitioners to re-examine environmental claims to ensure the claims are "clear, grounded in facts, information and data; and are valid, reproducible and appropriate" (PRSA, 2009, p. 1). The advisory concludes by outlining best practices for environmental claims.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) also published guidelines for environmental sustainability communications (CIPR, 2007). CIPR argues that stakeholders are demanding "more information and proof of sustainability, particularly with regards to the environment" and that has created more environmentally themed messages and "led to an explosion in 'green claims'" (CIPR, 2007, p. 1). Both the PRSA and CIPR documents reference the difficulty of environmental communication and advocate for practitioners to become aware of the specific legal and ethical concerns that come with this type of communication. Both documents provide a foundation for the study of best practices in environmental communication and public relations.

Our approach to incorporating environmental communication best practices into the public relations curriculum utilises an integrative approach, which simply means that environmental communication best practices content was *fully* integrated into the design of an existing course in the public relations curriculum. This approach is distinct from what might be termed an additive approach. We define the additive approach as one that simply adds a new case study, or a new unit to an existing course. Another example might be the addition of a course, usually an elective, to curriculum. Sterling (2004) describes this approach as "a *bolt-on* of sustainability ideas to the existing system, which remains largely unchanged" (p. 59, italics in original). In contrast, an integrative approach attempts to make the new content, in this case, best practices in environmental communication, an integral part of a current course without

sacrificing existing content or learning objectives. Sterling (2004) continues by describing this approach as “a *building in* of sustainability ideas into existing systems” (p. 59, italics in original). An integrative approach was recommended by the 2006 report of the Commission of Public Relations Education concerning ethics in the public relations curriculum. The commission recommended that in addition to specific ethics courses and seminars that “ethics should pervade all public relations professional education” (Turk, 2006, p. 4). We have taken a similar approach with environmental communication.

Because most campaigns courses utilise problem-based learning (PBL), integrating best practices in environmental communication makes the campaigns course an ideal fit for incorporating environmental communication into the public relations curriculum. Sterling (2004) and Huntzinger, Hutchins, Gierke and Sutherland (2007) posit that student-centred pedagogies are essential to facilitate the redesign of curriculum to address topics of environmental sustainability. Redesigning of curriculum, according to Sterling (2004), “emphasises process and the quality of learning, which is seen as an essentially creative, reflexive, and participative process” (p. 60). Huntzinger et al. (2007) suggest that the redesign of curriculum “signifies that sustainability and/or PBL is an essential element of [a] programs goals and significant effort has been made to rethink and redesign the program to completely integrate the concept into the curriculum at all levels” (p. 225). While our integration of environmental communication into the campaigns course does not offer a complete redesign of the public relations curriculum, we believe it offers an excellent first step toward the integration of environmental and sustainability communication into the public relations curriculum.

Kolb and Kolb (2005) and Kolb (1984) define this type of experiential or problem-based learning as a spiral where students experience, reflect, think, and act. Savery

(2006) identifies PBL as a unique learner-centred approach to experiential learning “organized around the investigation and resolution of messy, real-world problems” (p. 12). In problem-based learning the instructor acts as tutor or facilitator of learning, which increases student ownership and responsibility for learning and ultimately increases “learner motivation” (Savery, 2006, p. 12). These descriptions of PBL fit well with how many campaign courses are taught and the inclusion of environmental communication provides an ideal messy real-world problem.

Furthermore, problem-based learning has been found to be an effective method of teaching. Hickcox (1991) conducted a comprehensive review of 81 experiential learning research projects. She found that 61% of the studies found positive outcomes for experiential learning, 16.1% were inconclusive and 22% did not support the use of experiential learning. More recently Strobel and van Barneveld (2009) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis comparing PBL to conventional classroom pedagogies. Their review of studies conducted over three decades found that while PBL “is not the only a successful strategy to achieve effective learning of ill-structured and complex domains”, it is “significantly more effective than traditional instruction to train competent and skilled practitioners and to promote long-term retention of knowledge and skills” (p. 55). They also reported higher levels of student and teacher satisfaction.

This style of learning has also been studied specifically in public relations education. Attansey, Okigbo, and Smith (2008) found that students found value in client-based experiential learning. They rated the learning style high in critical thinking, applying theory, organising information and working with others (Attansey, Okigbo & Smith, 2008). Bush (2009), in examining internships, found that the experience helped students apply learning, develop professional identities, learn leadership and management skills, gain professional confidence, and enhance problem-solving abilities (p. 32).

The campaigns course is also an ideal candidate for integrating best practices in

environmental communication into a public relations curriculum because of the important linkage between student-centred and/or problem-based learning and the development of the critical thinking skills necessary for sustainable thinking. Huntzinger et al. (2007) discuss the need to redesign the engineering curriculum to teach environmental problem solving and enable sustainable thinking by noting that “to promote intellectual development and creative thinking (prerequisites for sustainable thinking), instructors should employ pedagogy that encourages a deep approach to learning” and that “instructional methods that encourage self-directed learning” are best suited to this goal (p. 220). “Student-centered learning”, they note, “can be promoted using active, cooperative, and/or inductive learning” and problem-based learning (PBL) “incorporates all three of these learning processes” (p. 220). Because “students need not only the knowledge base to generate effective engineering solutions; they need the intellectual development and awareness to understand the impact of their decisions”, Huntzinger et al. (2007) conclude “learner-centered environments are a prerequisite to the redesign of engineering education for sustainability” (p. 228). Similarly, in the realm of business communication, Mabry (2011) demonstrates how whole-person learning pedagogy, a form of problem-based learning which utilises “active learning activities, including intensive team-based

learning, interpersonal communication, group-focused activities, and problem-based collaboration, as well as simulation via role-playing”, enabled students to become “cognitively, behaviourally, and emotionally involved in the analysis and evaluation of the complex sustainability paradigm” (p. 120-122).

Integrating environmental communication best practices: Changes to the campaigns course

In integrating environmental communication best practices into the public relations campaign course, numerous revisions had to be made. This section is a discussion of the changes that we have made to the campaigns course, including new learning objectives, additional content, and structural changes, with an example of a new assignment.

New learning objectives

With the revisions to the class, new learning objectives needed to be created. Table 1 lists the course objectives suggested by Worley (2001) and based on recommendations of the Commission for Public Relations Education for a public relations campaign course. These objectives continue to guide our course. The environmental objectives, also listed in Table 1, address the additional content added to the course and focus the integration of environmental concepts into the campaign proposal. Furthermore, the objectives include references to the students’ ethical and professional development.

Table 1: Public relations campaigns course objectives

Traditional public relations campaigns course objectives	Additional environmental public relations campaigns objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse public relations situations and understand the eight-step process of public relations planning; • Examine and apply appropriate theories of persuasion necessary to effective public relations campaigns; • Examine and apply appropriate research techniques necessary to effective public relations campaigns; • Put theory into practice by planning a public relations campaign to meet a client problem/opportunity goal; • Gain experience in the practice of public relations by designing and implementing a public relations campaign; • Work as a team including delegating responsibilities, meeting deadlines, and coordinating activities; • Create and maintain effective relationships with clients; • Continue development of a sense of professionalism and ethicality in the practice of public relations by thorough, ethical preparation and meeting deadlines; and, • Finalise development of a resume, personal ethical statement, and portfolio that is 'interview-ready'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a public relations campaign using the theories of environmental communication. • Create a public relations campaign based on analysis of the interaction of social and environmental processes to develop best stewardship practices appropriate to the public relations situation. • Recognise the difference between environmental informational campaigns (social marketing), green marketing campaigns, and environmental advocacy campaigns. • Articulate the goals, assumptions, and limits associated with the different types of environmental communication campaigns. • Articulate how the course's environmental communication perspectives, theories, and methods inform campaign design. • Describe and analyse the role the public relations industry has played in facilitating and hindering the development of environmental stewardship best practices. • Articulate the importance of integrating criteria and best management practices for assessing the 'stewardship/sustainable' goals and initiatives of a public relations campaign in environmental communication. • Demonstrate an ability to develop and apply stewardship criteria in the creation of a public relations campaign in environmental communication. • Develop the skills and knowledge needed to advise future clients on effective and legitimate green public relations practices. • Develop the skills and knowledge needed to develop personal and professional environmental ethics.

New content

In our traditional campaigns course the instructor selects a client. The client is invited to class early in the semester to describe the organisation's public relations needs to the students. The students are divided up into teams, and each team is charged with developing a campaign proposal for the client.

The client then receives several campaign proposals from which to choose. Quite simply, the first step in integrating environmental communication into the course is to choose a client with an environmental need that can be addressed through a public relations campaign. While environmental issues will arise in most campaigns, choosing a client with an

environmental need enables students to explicitly explore a range of ethical and pragmatic issues associated with environmental communication without short-changing the pedagogical benefits of the traditional campaigns course.

In the traditional campaigns course, the client provides much of the background needed for the students to understand the specific industry and context of the organisation. This is not necessarily the case with regard to potential clients for a course with an environmental focus. For example, a manufacturer may not have the information required to conduct a meaningful environmental programme. In this case, students, much like public relations professionals who advise clients in today's expanding green marketplace, take on the responsibility of providing reliable information, sound analysis, and ethical recommendations on sustainability and environmental communication to the client. As instructors, it is our responsibility to provide our students with a meaningful opportunity to gain the knowledge they will need to perform these tasks.

Integrating environmental sustainability into the course presents two significant challenges. Finding ways to integrate this content into a traditional campaigns course, which is already flush with content and assignments, presents the first major challenge. In other words, as instructors we must find a way to integrate this material without cutting what has traditionally been covered in the course. The second significant challenge involves finding ways to integrate environmental communication in such a way that the topic is given the attention it deserves. Table 1 illustrates the 10 new environmental learning objectives that we identified, and these needed to be integrated with the nine existing learning objectives from the public relations campaigns course.

At first glance, integrating these additional 10 learning objectives appears to be a daunting task. However, this is not the case if these learning objectives are thought of as complementary to, and integrated with, the traditional problem-based pedagogy of the course. In other words, by integrating concepts

of environmental communication into the traditional course materials (lectures, readings, and exercises) and assignments (researching, writing and presenting the campaign proposal; exams) the structure of the course remains more or less the same, and the flow of the course is not radically interrupted.

Structures and example of an additional assignment

The new assignments for the integrated campaigns course are adaptations and expansions of traditional assignments. In the traditional course, the students produce a complete campaign proposal (written report) and make an oral presentation of the proposal to their client at the end of the semester. These two assessment items are the main focus of the course. While there is some variation in the public relations textbooks, the production of a campaign proposal is usually taught in steps. First, students are introduced to the basic components of a campaign proposal. These components generally include a situation analysis, a problem statement, a description of campaign goals and objectives, a description of the strategy employed, a section on tactics and programme design, a timeline, and a budget (Smith, 2009; Hagley, 2009). Then the students gain a firsthand understanding of how a campaign plan is produced as they proceed to research and write a campaign proposal one step at a time.

Our method for integrating principles of environmental communication into the course revolves around the addition of a new component to the production of a traditional campaign proposal: a section on environmental communication and sustainability best practices, which is situated after the problem statement section and developed prior to the campaign goals and plan. In this section of the proposal, students are expected to produce a set of criteria that the client can use to determine if their organisational actions are informed by sound principles of environmental sustainability, and to ensure that they are utilising environmental communication best practices. This document operates as the guiding principle for the entire campaign. Producing this section enables the students to

explore definitions of environmental sustainability, as well as best practices in environmental communication, as they endeavour to understand what is required for an organisation to position itself as green. It also helps highlight for the students the importance for public relations professionals to be involved in organisational strategic management (Grunic, 2006). The *CIPR best practices guidelines for environmental sustainability communications* notes that “Greenwash is more likely to occur if the culture of the organization does not place a high value on honesty, transparency and trust” and that businesses that move beyond the legal oriented “compliance culture” by considering ethical and pragmatic implications of messaging from the start are more likely to avoid greenwashing (CIPR, 2007).

Next, students are exposed to analyses, examples, and case studies of exemplary green campaigns and conversely of greenwashed campaigns. Students read textbook analyses of green product marketing and social marketing campaigns, practitioner guidelines for avoiding greenwashing, and seminal case studies of greenwashing.

Because the majority of greenwashing results from ignorance, not malice (Terra Choice, 2010; Horiuchi, R., Schuchard, R., Shea, L., & Townsend, S, 2009; CIPR, 2007), students are then instructed that their campaign proposal will include an environmental communication and sustainability best practices section. The goal of this section of the campaign proposal is to highlight the relationship between the strategy of the campaign plan and its implications for environmental sustainability. Since there is no simple checklist for assessing or evaluating a green public relations campaign, this assignment calls upon the students to make a clear and concise argument, which explains why and how their campaign strategy encourages and enables legitimate and defensible environmental communication. Just as students are expected to thoroughly research all components of their campaign proposal, so too are they expected to do the research necessary to produce the best practices in

environmental communication and sustainability section of their campaign proposal. In discussing this assignment, students are encouraged to reflect upon the importance that the best practices guidelines place upon ‘transparency’ (PRSA, 2009; CIPR, 2007). In this light, this new section of the campaign proposal becomes a tool that the organisation can utilise to explain its best practices in environmental communication and sustainability to its publics, and to invite dialogue about its efforts. In this way students are encouraged to consider environmental communication as an organisational practice, which by analogy can be assessed, especially with regard to the intended and unintended consequences of a campaign strategy and plan. Figure 1 provides a copy of that assignment.

Reflections on teaching the course: Lessons learned

In teaching a version of the class twice, our experience upholds the research about this being an effective teaching method (Hickcox, 1991; Attansey et al., 2008; Bush, 2009; Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009). Both the students and the faculty members experienced a course that spiralled around experience, reflections, thought and actions (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). We have found the changes successful, but not without challenges.

The most daunting task from the beginning was how to incorporate the content necessary to cover both public relations campaigns and environmental communication. The goal was deep knowledge and not a cursory look at the issue. Our original list of suggested readings would have filled three courses. In the end, adding the content was a compromise between depth and breadth. In the area of public relations campaigns, the students already had a sound foundation of the applicable processes and theories, so we decided to focus on adding depth where needed, and this has varied with each class based on the strengths and weaknesses of the students. With the environmental communication content, we aimed to give broad content and utilise the problem-based learning approach to facilitate

and encourage students to explore the depths of the topic. In our experience, few of the students had much background knowledge in environmental sustainability. For example, on the first day of class we asked as an icebreaker what is the most and least environmental activity in which they normally engage. The most common pro-environmental activity was recycling and the most common detrimental activity was drinking bottled water. This shows awareness, but not a deep understanding of the issue. This approach to content was successful, but a challenging process. In the end, we found that the students had enough content and did enough additional research to successfully complete the course and campaign. The success of adding more content is partly due to the structure of the course as problem-based. As Strobel and van Barneveld (2009) noted, PBL is often used for “ill-structured” topics (p. 55). Additionally, students sought more information when it was needed for the specific client issues; fitting with the concept that problem-based learners are pushed to be more responsible self-learners (Savery, 2006).

Another concern was how to add in the additional assignments. The structure of a problem-based course created freedom from the traditional lecture-based format. In problem-based learning “the teacher is no longer considered the main repository of knowledge” but is transformed into “the facilitator of collaborative learning” (Hmelo-Silver, 2004, p. 239). This transformation helped the addition of new assignments by making the new activities an integral part of the learning process. For example, because the new environmental communication and sustainability best practices assignment informed the students’ strategies, it was not perceived as extra work. Rather, the students experienced it as a necessary step associated with designing a campaign proposal and implementing a campaign plan.

A final concern that we had when planning the class was finding an appropriate client. We were fortunate that we received a university grant that exposed us to the environmental faculty at our university and people engaged in environmental activities in the community. It

was through those connections that we found our clients. Other universities may not have a similar grant programme; nonetheless, appropriate clients should not be difficult to find, as most campaign instructors and public relations faculty are well networked with local not-for-profit and small business sectors. Many universities now have environmental stewardship, or sustainability coordinators or offices, and these can be a rich resource for finding potential clients.

The course has proven successful in numerous ways. The first is that environmental content is presented in a nonthreatening way due to the fact that a public relations faculty member is viewed as a neutral party to the issue. The environmental focus resulted from the client’s needs, and not because the faculty member had a pet cause. This might not be the impression that students get from other classes offered by faculty who specialise in environmental topics. In our experiences, students saw the client dealing with environmental issues and that proved a more appropriate avenue for introducing environmental content. This was an important benefit of “building in” the content instead of “bolting on” an additional section or even course (Sterling, 2004, p. 59).

Another important and related benefit was that the environmental communication and sustainability best practices content were presented to students who, at first, were not interested in environmental issues. This is not the case for many students who select to take a class with an environmental focus. Our class is a public relations campaign course, and the client happens to be working on environmental issues. The naïve student may be in more need of environmental education than those who select to enrol in more traditional environmental classes. Currently, we are conducting research to learn if our integrative approach facilitates gains in environmental knowledge and affects environmental attitudes of the students. While this course is not a redesign of the entire curriculum as suggested by Huntzinger et al. (2007), the course did expose students to environmental issues in a learner-centred manner that could be a

harbinger of future curriculum changes. With this course, we have the prerequisite for a redesign that the authors were pushing for in engineering education (Huntzinger et al., 2007).

Another area of success was the inclusion of ethics into the course. Often ethics is a one-day lecture and then the students move on to the work of planning the campaign, but with this topic, ethics is interwoven into every step of the campaign research and planning. At each step of the campaign, students had to be ready to justify their strategic and tactical choices in relation to their own articulation of best practices in environmental communications. Ethics had pervaded each step and choice the students made, as was the suggestion of the Commission of Public Relations Education (Turk, 2006, p. 4). Finally, the use of an environmental topic provided students a challenging public relations problem. In our experiences, public relations campaigns courses in which the client presents a complex problem are also the courses where the students learn the most. In selecting clients, we always looked for difficult cases, although identifying those may prove unpredictable. Complexity abounds with environmental communication. By choosing a client with an environmental communication problem, instructors will ensure that their students benefit from a challenging and rewarding problem-based learning experience. We found that these challenges and rewards did increase learner motivation as suggested by Savery (2006).

Conclusion

Green has become an issue for public relations practitioners. Our students will be asked to construct green claims and to engage in environmental communication, but most will have had no education in this area. We propose that the public relations campaigns course, through an integrative approach, is an appropriate location for the addition of environmental communication in the public relations curriculum. The campaigns course's reliance on problem-based learning allows for the inclusion of additional content and assignments without radically restructuring the

class. Additionally, the problem-based learning approach is well suited to integrate sustainable thinking and enable students to develop the critical thinking skills, as well as the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional involvement that is needed to address complex issues associated with environmental and sustainability communication.

In our experience with these environmentally focused campaigns courses, we have found the addition a success. Through creating an environmental communication and sustainability best practices document, the students work with and apply the new content and use this as a foundation for their campaigns. While our approach may not be applicable or appropriate for all programmes, it may prove useful in other public relations courses when discussing environmental issues. We hope that our model and experiences can be instructive to others who want to help students address the recent "explosion in 'green claims'" (CIPR, 2007, p. 1).

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