



The role of narrative in public relations ethics pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Competence in ethical decision making is one of the most important issues in the industry and practice of public relations, yet professionals entering the discipline overestimate their knowledge and skills related to ethical principles. This article features a pedagogical approach to strengthen ethics education in public relations through the use of collaborative student-professional ethics narratives. This technique attempts to move beyond a traditional case study approach and transcend traditional classroom boundaries through the development of narratives featuring real ethics situations experienced by public relations professionals. The project involved the development, implementation and assessment of the pedagogical approach that required students to interview local communication professionals (mostly in public relations) and to craft narratives that explore ethical dilemmas these professionals faced. Pre- and post-test surveys and group feedback helped explore the impact of narrative inquiry in helping students internalize ethical lessons.

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1. Introduction

I had the opportunity last semester to witness a spectacular teaching demonstration by a search candidate on the topic of media relations. At one point in the presentation, the candidate presented two case studies highlighting ethical dilemmas faced by public relations professionals. This caught the attention of the colleague sitting next to me as much as it did the students. My colleague, who specializes in a different discipline, leaned over and asked me: “Does anyone tell students they’ll be facing these types of situations in their future careers?” I smiled back at him, and after the teaching presentation, I shared with him an overview of our program’s communication ethics course required for our students majoring in advertising and public relations. He seemed relieved, as well as surprised, that we would require such a course.

Like many other programs that educate public relations students, we focus on the skills, knowledge and abilities required to develop students into successful public relations practitioners. Equally important to our program, however, are outcomes related to strengthening moral and civic values (Boyle, 2007; Fall, 2006) and the ability of these future practitioners to demonstrate ethical and moral conduct in both their professional and personal lives (VanSlyke Turk, 2006, p. 22).

2. Literature review

The need for ethics education has been well supported in scholarly research and by professional organizations that guide the discipline (Bacon’s, 2007; Moberg, 2006; VanSlyke Turk, 2006). However, research shows there remains a gap between the goal for graduates to have ethical decision-making skills and reality, and that new professionals entering the discipline overestimate their learning and understanding of ethical principles (Kim & Johnson, 2009). Finding ways to bridge this gap has

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been the focus of educators and researchers who have explored varied pedagogical practices to strengthen ethics education including student–professional mentor interaction (Place, 2008), group exercises (Kovacs, 2008), team teaching (Lingwall, 2008), guest lectures (Lingwall, 2008), experiential learning (Worley, Worley, Hugenberg, & Elkins, 2009), simulated learning (Kuhn, 1998), capstone courses (Neff, 2002; Silverman, 2007), and case studies (Laditka & Houck, 2006; Moberg, 2006; Parkinson & Ekachai, 2002; Sykes, 2008).

Context is especially important to help students integrate their previously acquired knowledge to complex problem solving (Moberg, 2006), especially problems that have ethical implications. Making ethical decisions requires wisdom gained through tacit knowledge, which “is transmitted through experience, through narrative, and through ‘deep’ social interaction” (Moberg, 2006, p. 312). Several pedagogical strategies are used to help educators achieve contextual understanding of real-world situations students will face when they become public relations practitioners. Most of these can be classified as experiential learning, which includes a broad spectrum of diverse forms of pedagogy. Kuhn (1998) advocates simulation as one effective experiential learning approach because of its ability to engage “the whole student, not just their (sic) intellect and analytic powers” (p. 305). Arousing emotion is central to help students embody the theoretical lessons learned in the classroom, and Kuhn (1998) contends simulations surpass case studies as a means to arouse emotion in learning because they are closer to representing “real life” (p. 301).

Case studies, however, still serve an important purpose in the public relations curriculum, and they are favored by educators (Lingwall, 2008). Through case studies, students are challenged to use a myriad of problem-solving approaches to analyze the case, to exercise “moral imagination in the search for innovative solutions” (Winston, 2000, p. 156), and to consider values and ethical theories that may help them resolve the ethical dilemma presented. Many of the most compelling case studies, however, feature large companies or situations that students (especially those not yet working in the field) may find difficult to envision encountering in their future careers. The case presented in the previously referenced teaching demonstration, for example, featured a prominent media relations gaffe by Walmart. Although I use such case studies in my classes, I always feel students are missing important opportunities to connect the case to real situations they will face in their future careers.

Simulations, case studies, and other forms of experiential learning fill an important role in ethics education in public relations. However, in my own experience teaching a communication ethics course and observing others who do the same, it is apparent students do not take to heart the ethical concepts they are studying. Students learn a variety of theories and approaches to ethical decision making, and they study a myriad of *real-world* cases where professionals are challenged with moral dilemmas. It seems, however, students do not embrace or embody the type of morality or social conscience we had like to see instilled within them. The related virtues do not become part of their being. To achieve that level of learning and integration, a deeper level of lived experience is required. Such living wisdom may be fostered through the type of pedagogical project featured in this article.

2.1. Going beyond traditional case study method

Several researchers have explored techniques to further the case study method to enhance its impact on students; that is, to strengthen students’ ability to internalize moral lessons, such as by connecting ethics lessons to broadcast news events (Sykes, 2008) and by using social media and other technologies to chat with in-house or agency practitioners about cases (Kovacs, 2008).

Moberg (2006) carried case studies further by encouraging students to capture stories from practitioners they know, and Laditka and Houck (2006) assigned student-developed case studies created from students’ own experience. Both of these approaches demonstrated positive learning for the students, but they involved students who were more mature than the typical undergraduate students in many baccalaureate institutions, and the case studies featured general business issues and environments. Moberg’s (2006) research involved MBA students, and Laditka and Houck’s (2006) research featured students in a graduate business management program whose average age was 35.2 years. Students in many public relations academic programs are young, inexperienced, not yet working in the field, and have no contacts in the local community to initiate this type of field research. For these students, other methods are needed that blend experiential learning with case studies. Little work has been done to extend this effort into undergraduate public relations education.

This project attempts to advance this cause by incorporating narrative inquiry, building on research that supports the value of stories in learning. “Stories can have a strong impact on our moral development. Stories have an ability to change us ethically by experiencing the characters and the lessons they learn” (Coles, 1989, p. 137). Through stories the writer and reader can learn concepts and understand related theories. As Bochner (1997) explains: “Theory meets story when we ‘think with’ a story rather than about it” (p. 434).

When prepping my communication ethics courses for the first time, I looked far and wide, to no avail, for texts featuring narratives that would resonate with my younger population of students. There also was limited research featuring the value and impact of such narratives in teaching communication ethics. This study furthers knowledge in this area by developing a new pedagogical approach for teaching public relations ethics, and it examines the value and effectiveness of this type of pedagogical approach in reaching young students about to confront professional ethical challenges for the first time.

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