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Outsourcing public relations pedagogy: Lessons from innovation, management futures, and stakeholder participation

Paul Willis[a,*], David McKie[b,1]

[a] Centre for Public Relations Studies, Leeds Business School, Leeds Metropolitan University, 25, Queen Square, Leeds LS2 8AF, United Kingdom
[b] Waikato Management School, The University of Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we advocate for innovation in public relations pedagogy by importing ideas and practices from four areas. The first area involves work on disruptive technology and education that applies lessons from Silicon Valley innovations to high school education. The second area considers how knowledge management and project management findings confirm the value of teaching as the cocreation of knowledge. The third draws parallels between the challenges of moving from traditional to future management and moving from traditional to future education. All three areas offer models for innovation by adopting a more improvisational, experimental, and risk-taking ethos in education. In the fourth area, we shift from theoretical advocacy to look at how these innovations feed into an example of public relations pedagogy as co-created stakeholder participation.
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1. Setting a context (1): Silicon Valley goes to high schools

Context is not simply a passive surrounding but an interwoven co-creator of meaning. Accordingly, rather than seeking to establish that public relations pedagogy is largely out of date by a focus on the past, we frame this article around potential gains in importing ideas from other areas. One of the most radical recent proposals for educational innovation is Christensen, Johnson, and Horn's (2010) *Disrupting Class*: *How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. It offers a bleak analysis of the U.S. high school system as a preface to proposing transformational possibilities. The book partners two practitioner–theorists from education with Clay Christensen, a Silicon Valley veteran acknowledged as one of the world's leading thinkers on disruptive technologies.

Christensen et al. (2010) start where considerations of pedagogy ought to start – with a discussion of purpose – and they set out four aspirations. The first is "maximize human potential" (Christensen et al., 2010, p. 1). Unfortunately, in our field this is usually diminished in defining public relations as some form of "leadership and management function" (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2009, p. 4). That establishes early that public relations is primarily concerned with maximizing some areas rather than all areas. Broader individual and social aspects come, if at all, later and in a significantly scaled-down form.

Christensen et al.'s (2010) second educational purpose is facilitating "a vibrant, participative democracy in which we have an informed electorate that is capable of not being 'spun' by self interested leaders" (p. 1). Given the close association of public relations with "spin," it is hard not to interpret this as implying that better education would counteract negative social impacts from public relations. We advocate acknowledging the field's social stigma up front and explicitly turning

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 0113 81 23578.
E-mail addresses: p.a.willis@leedsmet.ac.uk, r.boston@leedsmet.ac.uk (P. Willis), dmckie@waikato.ac.nz (D. McKie).
[1] Tel.: +64 7 838 4197.

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our ambition to countering that negative view and seeking a more aspirational purpose in line with maximizing human potential. It would certainly be easier to disrupt the almost taken-for-granted assumption that most public relations is corporate public relations. It opens up opportunities for a reconstituting and repurposing of the whole field.

Disrupting Class (Christensen et al., 2010) also challenges public relations in its third educational purpose to "hone the skills, capabilities, and attitudes that will help our economy remain prosperous and economically competitive" (p. 1). This open advocacy of enterprise and entrepreneurship is iconoclastic in most schools. Ironically, it is a move that would allow public relations education to move towards a greater promotion of entrepreneurial skills. Such a founding purpose points to the need to follow through with content in a field such as public relations where many practitioners work for agencies, or run their own companies.

Christensen et al.'s (2010) fourth purpose, namely, to "nurture the understanding that people can see things differently – and that those differences merit respect rather than persecution" (p. 1), also has consequences for content. It suggests that courses in diversity should be at the core of public relations learning. Indeed, public relations pedagogy must give more priority to recent content that looks at globalization as a learning (Gerson, 2010), rather than just a consulting, opportunity.

2. Setting a context (2): the static knowledge problem

Communication scholars have long struggled against the idea of communication as merely being a conduit for a message. Yet, a conduit model still underpins much pedagogic practice and thinking. This emerges more clearly by examining parallels between the problems found in the "transfer," or "transmission," of knowledge in most forms of education and that in knowledge management (KM) and project management (PM).

Jones and McKie (2009) identify such "problems as partly stemming from inherent limitations in the notion of (knowledge) transfer as the mechanical transmission of already existing material" (p. 181). In rejecting this notion, they "illustrate how, rather than simply being transmitted, project team knowledge is actually co-constructed and shared" (p. 181) and so position "communication as both central to, and constitutive of, knowledge" (p. 181) in line with Bernays' retort "we don't deal in images . . . We deal in reality" (cited in Ewen, 1996, p. 6).

In the knowledge transfer that constitutes much public relations teaching, we argue for greater acknowledgement of the knowledge students bring and the role it could productively play. We believe more can be done to democratize education while simultaneously creating more dynamic and effective teaching by involving students and staff in expanded interactions and explicitly co-created learning processes. As in knowledge and project management, that kind of reconfiguration both encourages an associated shift "toward continuously improving knowledge and skills (in order to be flexible enough to meet the needs of an ever-changing environment) . . . [and] a more creative management approach concerned with developing context and processes for innovation" (Jones & McKie, 2009, p. 190).

In further developing this reconfiguration as a guiding framework for what they call "intelligent participation" (p. 180), Jones and McKie (2009) align well with Christensen et al.'s (2010) first aspiration: to "maximize human potential" (p. 1) by increasing the participation space for students. They do so at the expense of one-way faculty communication. Intelligent participation also contributes to facilitating "a vibrant, participative democracy" (Christensen et al., 2010, p. 1) by enacting it on a small scale. Indeed, we go so far as to suggest that public relations pedagogy might be better considered as intelligent participation in stakeholder dialogue. In this way, it can also promote the diversity in content that is inherent in Christensen et al.'s last two aspirations for education.

3. Setting a context (3): paralleling management futures and education futures

Hamel and Breen's (2007) analysis of the past that inspired their book on *The Future of Management* resonated too strongly with our public relations educational experiences to ignore: "The machinery of modern management gets fractious, opinionated, and free-spirited human beings to conform to standards and rules, but in so doing it squanders prodigious quantities of human imagination and initiative. It brings discipline to operations, but imperils organizational adaptability" (p. 8). As Robinson and Aronica (2009) and others have argued, the machinery of modern management closely resembles the machinery of modern teaching.

This is relevant to updating teaching as well to updating management. Hamel and Breen (2007) make a strong case that experimentation beats planning. They take that position because rigid planning is unlikely to fit in a business environment that is not only "more volatile than ever" (p. 9) but is characterized by "disconcerting discontinuities" (p. 11). In a world where the only bankable is that the future will be surprising, the present, let alone the past, "is an increasingly unreliable guide to the future, competitive success depends less on *planning* for what will come next and more on continuously experimenting with what *could* come next" (p. 156). Indeed, how sure are we as educators that we know the future of public relations, especially when the majority of the students probably employ social media in practice much more than the majority of the faculty that teach them?

Hamel and Breen (2007) note that resilience requires "a lot of lightly scripted pre-adaptation . . . that give associates the chance to pre-adapt rather than react" (p. 156). This approach underpins our example of innovation in the field. We also return to the theme of communication as constituent of knowledge and to a different take on the idea of teaching as intelligent participation in stakeholder engagement.

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