TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM:

AN EXPERIENCE WITH A SHIFTING PARADIGM

Presented by

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After over a decade of university teaching, I firmly believed that students needed certain things from me as their professor in order to have a full educational experience in my classes. What was it I thought I had to offer?

First, I felt that I had knowledge. After all, why else would I have been there? This was the basis of my credibility as a teacher at a university.

Second, I believed that I had experience – experience that put the knowledge into dynamic practice – and I could share this with them to add dimension and color, so that they would see how the knowledge base fits into their career plans.

Third, I believed that my own method for conveying this knowledge and experience in the classroom – the various pedagogical techniques that I chose – would be an essential part of their learning.

Finally, I believed that the classroom experience itself, including the opportunity for interactivity with both other students and with me, would be important, no essential, to their professional socialization as they became public relations practitioners. I believed then, and still do, that this socialization process is an important part of a profession.

The purpose of this brief contribution to the discussion is to reflect on the need for a shift in pedagogical paradigm for a virtual classroom to work in public relations. Further, I hope to disabuse some of you (as I had to do to myself) that your belief that students truly need your personal presence is somewhat misguided.

TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGY IN THE PR CLASSROOM

"Professors often characterize on-line teaching as cold, impersonal, and in various ways inferior to live teaching. At best they might allow it a presence as a poor cousin, rather like correspondence school, that would be chosen only by those unable to take classes any other way. With such a view and with administrations talking about on-line teaching mainly as a way to save money, it's little wonder that faculty are less than excited about the prospect of Net-based education." [1] Knox, The Rewards of Teaching On-Line, http://www.h-net.org/aha/papers/Knox.html, accessed July 6, 2004

This was the actual view of some of my colleagues when I first decided to take the plunge and take our first course on-line. Indeed, I believe that some of my colleagues still believe this in spite of our progress.

University teaching, I believe, has been characterized by pedagogical philosophy that seems to believe that one-size-fits all. Few university professors are schooled in pedagogy and whereas many are concerned about how their students learn, all you have to do is walk down a corridor in a traditional university to see the professors standing in front of groups of students giving lectures or facilitating their brand of class discussion. This is where it begins and ends for many profs. Whereas we may have made great strides in considering cultural differences and challenges of disabled students, on balance, I believe that we have not recognized the differences in the so-called average student.

Quite apart from the notions that some students are visuals, some auditories and still others kinesthetics and that we need to consider at least this minimum of variations in our students learning styles, there are other issues when it comes to both curriculum development and to actual teaching methodology. And if we fail to recognize that students are, indeed, individuals, we have a very limited paradigm on which to base our teaching. And it is my belief that that paradigm limits our ability to do what teaching is supposed to do: result in student learning.

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[1] E.L. Knox, The Rewards of Teaching On-Line, http://www.h-net.org/aha/papers/Knox.html, accessed July 6, 2004

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES VERSUS THE "NEW" PARADIGM

If you regularly read educational you are probably already aware that the *mot du jour* in educational circles today is *constructivism*. Indeed, Stanford University's Prof. D. Phillips calls it the "fashionable magic word."[2] Constructivism is one of three broad categories of approaches to teaching and learning that have each developed a following over the years.

B.F. Skinner famously used animal models to describe an approach to teaching and learning that was based on the belief that we react reflexively to our environment. This so-called *behaviorist* approach was applied to education and resulted in tightly designed curricula that all but ignored the notion of letting students think for themselves in favor of identifying target behaviors and selecting teaching approaches that maximized the probability of obtaining the desired educational outcomes. Positive reinforcement for displays of the desired behavior is a major aspect of behaviorist learning. What this means is that inside the classroom, lectures dominate and individual work takes precedence over group work. The teaching focuses on skill development with the instructor viewed as the vessel and transmitter of knowledge. This approach is typical of the traditional college and university classrooms.

Humanism, what might otherwise be termed 'holistic' learning, with the focus on the whole student: mental, physical, emotional, and moral development is the second traditional approach. Humanism focuses on the goal of developing the individual, de-emphasizing facts and skills and increasingly emphasizing creativity and critical thinking. This seems like a kind of step forward in a teaching approach, but in my view falls short of facilitating true learning.

The final category of the three, c*onstructivism*, provides a more comprehensive and effective model for teaching PR for long-term advantage. It's based on the notion that students ought to be participating actively in their own learning, developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In other words, they ought to be constructing their own learning based on prior knowledge and skills and newly discovered concepts.

The instructor is a facilitator, rather than a purveyor of knowledge – a role that's tailor-made for a virtual learning environment where the professor isn't at the front of the classroom anyway, and students make choices about when, where and how they will move through the materials presented to them. I believe that trying to stay at the front of this

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[2] D. Phillips, "An Opinionated Account of the Constructivist Landscape," in constructivism in Education: Opinions and Second Opinions on controversial Issues, 99th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Vol. 99, Part 1), D. Phillips and M. Early (eds), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.

virtual classroom is a mistake. The on-line materials presented to the students are a kind of buffet, and how they choose to select and use them is largely dependent upon who they are, what experiences they have and where they are in their learning.

As an educational philosophy constructivism suggests that these beliefs underlie the process of curriculum development, implementation of the curriculum and subsequent student learning from the process. It based on the belief that:

- Students must be engaged in actively constructing their own learning.

- Learning is largely a social process wherein students learn by engaging in dialogue and discussion.

- The role of the instructor is that of educational catalyst, facilitating the learning process using pedagogical techniques that place them in the background.

- The distillation of new knowledge, attitudes and skills are based on previously gained knowledge, skills and experiences that must be examined.

- Evaluation should be based, at least partially, on self-assessment. [3]

THE BACK DRAFT: A NEW PARADIGM LEADS TO PEDAGOGICAL CREATIVITY

When I considered my traditional approach in the classroom (an approach that had stood me in good stead for over a decade), I realized that I would have to change my way of thinking about things to teach on-line. A constructivist approach helped because it allowed me to incorporate the following into my courses:

1. I designed materials that incorporated opportunities for students whose understanding of prerequisite material was less than optimal to stop and visit materials to bring their individual understanding up to the required level. For example, imbedded in course notes that student work through individually, there are links to on-line background material that can be skipped over by those students who already possess this knowledge.

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[3] Parsons, P. "A Constructivist Philosophy for Ethics Education in Public Relations: A Conceptual Model." *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, under review.

2. I incorporated student forums where each student is required to consider a particular question and, based on his or her own experience, contribute to the forum. This is done asynchronously to allow for the highest degree of accessibility.

3. I placed myself in the background (a new experience for me!), touching base with the students as a group on pre-determined days of the week only, making myself available to them individually and putting their own experience with the material in the forefront. This, of course, is really ore of a min-set than an overt activity.

One thing that I have yet to include is the opportunity for student self-assessment.

So, what have been the unexpected benefits? For me personally, teaching in this non-traditional way has done a number of things.

1. First, because I actually wrote the courses I taught, I was able to streamline the materials that I had previously used in the classroom, significantly updating and expanding them. In completing this expansion, I also culled even more materials that would be useful in the traditional classroom setting thus providing a bonus for on-campus students. Since the course notes are all in writing, you need to be very specific about the content – no waffling.

2. Thinking about putting me in the background puts the students and their experiences in the forefront of the classroom. Now, in my on-campus courses, I'm much more likely to incorporate assignments and activities that are student-led. For examples, rather than having me facilitate the discussions in my ethics classes, the students lead these interactions.

3. Recognizing that students are individuals, I permit students to make a choice on one of their major assignments. On the first day of class, they choose their preference for either an academic paper or a final examination and although students sometimes find this stressful at the outset (as one student put it she just wants to be told what to do), in the end, to a person, they all thanked me for letting them choose their strength. The lesson: there is more than one way to evaluate the same objectives. Why do we continue to evaluate all students in the same way as if they all were identical?

4. Probably most exciting outcome for me personally is the creativity that it has ignited in me. I am constantly searching for ways to improve the students' educational experience. This resulted for me in the actual development of a course in creativity in public relations – something I attribute largely to my experience of looking at teaching and learning differently.

I believe fundamentally, that as teachers we all need to be given a shake-up once in a while. Our long-held beliefs and pedagogical approaches need to be questioned. For me, taking my teaching into this new environment was my shake-up.