Training Future PR Practitioners and Serving the Community Through a "Learn by Doing" Undergraduate University Curriculum

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Training Future PR Practitioners and Serving the Community Through a “Learn by Doing” Undergraduate University Curriculum

By Douglas J. Swanson

Those of us who teach public relations within higher education are always under pressure to provide the most relevant knowledge and skills to our students. We want students to be “well rounded” in their education, so we require courses in art, cultural studies, English, and history. We want students to be good critical thinkers, so we ask students to take courses in ethics and philosophy. At the same time, we want students to have strong professional skills — so we build major programs of study with courses in writing, media relations, and legal issues.

We aim to provide students with an appropriate balance of theoretical/conceptual skills and ‘hands on’ training. We want new college graduates going out into the public relations workplace not only to know what to do, but why they’re doing it.

Yet it always seems that the college curriculum is ‘behind the curve’ in terms of what the industry is looking for. The academic environment is bureaucracy-heavy. Change takes place slowly (see Coombs & Rybacki, 1999). Many industry professionals often don’t understand the difficulty educators face in delivering a broad spectrum of curriculum that calls for students to become proficient in wide variety of competencies. Professionals also wonder why we can’t quickly update curriculum when the need for a new skill set surfaces.

For years now, the journalism field in general has been pulled in different directions by “editors who don’t like the quality of graduates, colleagues in other fields who consider journalism schools as trade schools, [and] journalists who state that journalism education is not relevant to the practice of journalism” (Dickson & Sellmeyer, 1992, p. 11). What was true in the 90s remains true today. There continue to be calls within PR to “strengthen the professional bond between education and the practice” (Report of the Commission...2006, p.8).

In fact, the pressure today is much greater than it was in the 90s, because as we all know, the journalism and public relations workplace is being forced to adapt to immense technological and bottom-line demands. More than ever, higher education programs struggle with what students most need to know, how to implement the curriculum quick enough to have it be relevant, and — most importantly — how to cover the costs of making it happen.

The immediate and obvious problem is this: If we were to prepare students with all the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in PR, a bachelor's degree program would take six years (perhaps more). On the other hand, when we create what appears to be a reasonable, four year program of
study for a degree, we must inevitably leave out instruction in some areas that will nevertheless be important to newly-minted graduates.

While I don’t have the ultimate answer to the dilemma, the university where I teach has found an effective way to balance curriculum concerns on a variety of fronts. The Journalism Department at California Polytechnic State University has established a public relations curriculum that adequately balances students’ preparation in conceptual knowledge and practical skills. Equally important — and what I think makes our program unique — is that we have found a way to do this by introducing ‘hands on’ public relations work for community clients in every course in the PR sequence.

At Cal Poly, our students gain valuable expertise right from the beginning of their academic experience, and dozens of non-profit organizations in our community have been helped by getting public relations support of the highest quality — PR help they need, but cannot afford to pay for. In this article, I will present a profile of our university community and academic department. I will describe our curriculum and its structure and outcome. Finally, I will discuss a couple of our many success stories that illustrate how a curriculum of this type has been a win-win situation for all parties involved.

Cal Poly — organization and academics

Founded in 1901 as a vocational high school, Cal Poly granted its first bachelor’s degree in 1942. Cal Poly is now part of the California State University system and, with more than 1,300 acres on the main campus, is the second largest land-holding university in California. Cal Poly has seven colleges offering 66 undergraduate programs, 26 master’s programs and a doctoral program in education. The university’s motto of “Learn by Doing” is reflected in academic programs that are mostly within technical and professional areas — agriculture, architecture, business, and engineering. Cal Poly is on the quarter system and has four ten-week terms in each academic year. The university enrolls about 18,000 undergraduates, and each year receives more than 35,000 applications from prospective freshmen for just 3,500 seats in the next fall’s freshman class.

The Journalism Department is housed within the College of Liberal Arts, which has 16 other academic departments. Enrollment is capped at about 3,100 students. Although each year about 700 prospective freshmen apply for freshman admission as Journalism majors, the department can accept only about 40 students. In the 2007-08 academic year, the department had 268 majors, seven full-time faculty, about a dozen adjunct instructors and four full-time staff members.

San Luis Obispo

Cal Poly is located in San Luis Obispo, a town of approximately 44,000 people mid-way between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Just seven miles from the ocean, San Luis Obispo is surrounded by rolling hills dotted by oak trees. Its economy is largely driven by tourism dollars, since the town sits in the middle of a burgeoning central California ‘wine country,’ with more than 300 vineyards and wineries within a 25 mile radius. The median household income in San Luis Obispo is less than $65,000 a year — and the median cost of a home is well over $360,000. For that reason, only a small fraction of the people who work in San Luis Obispo earn enough money to afford to own a home there.

The community has a strong egalitarian spirit. That, coupled with the high cost of living, results in a strong demand for support services provided to the community’s middle- and low-income families by nonprofit groups. San Luis Obispo County has more than 1,000 nonprofit and charitable organizations, and the Journalism Department believes helping these organizations is a key part of our community service work. For that reason, most of the PR work that finds its way into classes is in support of community non-profits.

Curriculum overview

The Cal Poly curriculum requires students to complete 180 units of course work, including 72...non-profit organizations... have been helped by getting public relations support of the highest quality...
of electives outside of the department; typically, students select a modern language, other complementary courses in related fields (English, communication, graphic design) or select a subject minor from another department. A minor is not a requirement for graduation.

Within the Journalism major, students complete 60 units. This involves a 30-unit core with courses in writing, law, ethics, visual communication, global communication, a required internship, and a senior project. Students must also complete 12 units of departmental electives from options in advertising, agricultural communication, journalism history, multimedia reporting, or special topics courses.

The Professional Values and Competencies of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication serve as the foundational basis for the curriculum’s learning goals. Students are reminded in each course to tie the learning experiences of the course to the eleven competency areas identified by AEJMC (AEJMC Professional Values and Competencies, 2000).

In addition to their core courses and department electives, students choose a subject concentration in news/editorial, broadcasting, or public relations — and complete 18 units of coursework in their concentration area. Each student’s concentration area ends by completion of a capstone course in the student-run media entity in that area.

Students in news/editorial concentration area work on the staff of The Mustang Daily. Publication of a student newspaper began at Cal Poly in 1916, long before the creation of the Journalism Department. Today, The Mustang Daily is unique among college student newspapers in that it is entirely reported, written, edited, and printed on campus, by students.

A similar level of independence is enjoyed by students who concentrate in the broadcast area and complete their capstone course working in the Journalism Department’s radio and television operations — KCPR-FM and CPTV (Cal Poly TV, broadcast on campus cable). Broadcasts began in the 1960s; recently, the radio station moved to new digitally-equipped studios.

Finally, students in the PR concentration complete their capstone work in Central Coast PRspectives, the department’s student-run public relations firm. CCPR was organized in 2002. Since then, the firm has invested thousands of hours of work on behalf of dozens of community-based nonprofits. Students who work in CCPR help the firm with clients and projects that are ‘corporate’ (everyone contributes) while also individually conducting a campaign for one or more clients.

**PR concentration courses**

The structure and strengths of our program have allowed us to develop a curriculum that provides students with maximum exposure to PR practices, while helping clients in our community. Here are the seven public relations courses we offer that allow students maximum opportunities for knowledge gain and skill development in accord with Cal Poly’s “Learn by Doing” philosophy:

**JOUR 312: Introduction to Public Relations**

The introductory public relations class is a lecture-based overview course that, typically, has two-thirds of its quarterly 60-student enrollment represented by non-Journalism majors (JOUR 312 is an elective offering for several other academic units). It presents a great challenge to the instructor in a number of ways. The first is to cover, in a ten-week quarter, a wide range of subject areas including PR history, theory and research, public opinion, media, government and politics, law, ethics, and career opportunities. The second area of challenge is for the instructor to keep the class sufficiently focused on key journalism concepts while not alienating students who are not headed for a career in the field.

**PR educators believe that critical thinking skills are among the most important to teach.**

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is probably the most important single goal of JOUR 312.

JOUR 312 students individually perform a Mini Campaign for a client who, more often than not, has never benefited from professional PR work. The student's work involves a consultation, development of a plan, administration of the plan, and evaluation of success. A written report is made at the end of the term, with work samples. The work represents 10% of the student's course grade.

Some clients are provided by the instructor (the department receives lots of requests for PR services from clients in the community). Students are free to find their own client if they wish. The instructor keeps close watch over all of the student projects, and, in many cases the nonprofit organization that is assisted with a successful Mini Campaign is then advanced to the next course in the PR sequence for further work by students.

JOUR 342: Public Relations Writing and Editing

The JOUR 342 class is a lab-based course with an enrollment of between 18 and 33. Students spend

Each member of the student team completes an evaluation of the members of the team; there is also a client evaluation of the team's performance.

about half their time learning about strategic planning, persuasion, writing and editing, and action and response concepts. The remainder of the students' time is spent writing — flyers, letters, news releases, public-service announcements, and SWOT analyses are just a few of the tasks students are asked individually to develop. Finally, students are grouped in teams of four or five to develop an Action Plan for a community-based nonprofit.

The Action Plan requires students to complete a consultation and organizational analysis with the client. The goal is for students to assess the client's overall communication plan (or lack thereof) and make effective recommendations that, if implemented, will increase the client organization's communicative strengths. Student teams are encouraged to identify some immediate actions that could be taken — and these tactics (with the resulting tools) are included in the Action Plan report.

Students present their report to the class at the end of the term. Each member of the student team completes an evaluation of other members of the team; there is also a client evaluation of the team's performance. The project in total represents 20% of the student's grade for the course, with the student and client evaluations representing 15% of the project grade.

JOUR 413: Public Relations Campaigns

The campaigns course is structured similarly to the writing and editing course. It is laboratory-based, with an enrollment of 18 students per section. Students spend about half of their time learning conceptual issues (in this case, campaign strategic planning, tactics, and evaluation) and the other half of their time working on hands-on tasks. In JOUR 413, students are grouped in teams to conduct 'real world' public relations campaigns for clients that have identified or who have contacted the department for PR help.

Typically, organizations that have been subject to the JOUR 342 Action Plan are then transitioned directly into JOUR 413 to receive the specific campaign help that Action Plan called for. Since the two courses are taken in sequence, it is common for students to transition from 342 to 413 and take 'their client' with them for further PR work.

Just as they would if they were working in a 'real' PR firm, students completing a client campaign in JOUR 413 make a written and oral presentation. Presentations are made at the end of the term, and represent 25% of the student's course grade.

JOUR 415: Advanced Public Relations Practice (CCPR)

Although the department's student-run PR firm has an open door policy (any student who wishes to, may volunteer to work for CCPR), the majority of the staff is comprised of students who are earning credit in the required capstone course JOUR 415. Enrollment in this course ranges between three and twelve students per term.

Students in JOUR 415 meet collectively for one hour a week of staff planning time. The planning meetings are overseen by the faculty member and the CCPR manager, a student volunteer who is unpaid but earns academic credit to manage the firm's administrative operations. Students enrolled in JOUR 415 must complete an additional four hours of work each week on campaigns the firm is conducting. CCPR has its own office within the department, and receives approximately $2,500 per year from the university in funding support for administrative needs.
Clients that were subject to the Action Plan in JOUR 342 can be transitioned either to the campaigns class or to JOUR 415 for the creation and administration of a public relations campaign. It is not uncommon for clients with needs that span a longer timeframe than a ten-week academic quarter to be worked with, sequentially, by students from the two courses. The order in which this takes place is mostly irrelevant since the campaign objectives of JOUR 413 and 415 are similar.

At the end of each quarter, students in JOUR 415 make a formal campaign presentation. Client representatives attend, as do faculty and other students. All student presenters are evaluated on their strengths and weaknesses of their presentations, and these evaluations contribute to final course grades.

*Other curriculum opportunities*

Four other courses in the Cal Poly Journalism curriculum allow students to get hands-on experience with public relations. I describe them here as a group because they are not exclusively public relations-focused.

In JOUR 400 (Special Projects for Advanced Undergraduates), students work individually with a faculty member to conduct research or carry out a project related to journalism or public relations practice. JOUR 400 is a course conducted by arrangement, so students are able to work on projects that earn between one and four units of academic credit. It allows the student interested in PR to put a lot of focus into a specific method or issue within the discipline.

The journalism internship (JOUR 444) is a required course for all students. Students complete 180 clock hours to earn three units of credit — and may do so in a variety of different media environments. It is common for students in the public relations concentration to intern in PR agencies in Los Angeles or San Francisco, work with nonprofits in San Luis Obispo, or even complete an internship overseas in conjunction with an international education experience. The employer benefits by getting valuable service from a student who is within a year of completion of his/ her degree program. The student benefits by networking, getting experience in an on-the-job setting, and by creating items that can later become a part of the student’s professional portfolio.

Cal Poly Journalism students will complete a senior project before they are graduated. The ultimate “learn by doing” experience, senior project (JOUR 460) can be either a theoretical or practically-focused work. It is completed in consultation with a faculty member — but it is not managed by the faculty member. It thus becomes a sink or swim experience for the student, something that is valuable indeed for any student’s professional development (See Rodrick & Dickmeyer, 2002). Cal Poly students are required to have their senior projects be theory-based, address a critical question or questions within the profession, and demonstrate proficiency in a variety of competency areas.

Finally, the department offers occasional special topics courses as JOUR 470. A recent special topics course in the PR concentration was Public Relations Management. Future special topics courses in the area will include Public Relations Theory and Research and a course focusing on the life of William Randolph Hearst and his influence over the journalism and public relations field.

*Successes and challenges*  
In total, the seven courses described here allow the Journalism Department to integrate Cal Poly’s “learn by doing” philosophy to benefit both students and non-profit clients. Students benefit by getting immediate exposure to real-world clients, and by experiencing the challenges clients present that cannot be replicated through hypothetical classroom discussions or case studies.

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students have provided PR assistance for more than two-dozen community-based organizations. While we do not keep track of all the hours worked by students on behalf of clients, in the JOUR 415 class alone students regularly amass more than 300 "billable" hours in each academic quarter.

The "learn by doing" approach in our curriculum is not without its challenges. We've had a couple of clients that looked good going in, but subsequent investigation found their organizations totally dysfunctional, to the point where students could not accomplish campaign goals because client representatives were in dispute over what the goals should be. We've had a JOUR 342 class team produce an outstanding Action Plan that the client dismissed as irrelevant and flatly refused to accept. We've also had an on-campus administrative unit with real, relevant PR needs come to us for help — and be unable to get the much-needed work picked up by students because they perceived the unit's project to be "boring" (or, rather, not as much fun as a community concert series that those same students were falling all over themselves to work with).

Nevertheless, students repeatedly tell us (personally, and in their end-of-the-quarter blind evaluations) that the real world components we are building into the courses are relevant and appreciated. They add to the value of the learning experience in ways that are consistent with the research findings from other academic environments (Barry, 2005).

As a faculty, we are challenged by the issue of assessment. We want to know what students have learned through their higher education experience. We want to know how the "learn by doing" element adds value to our PR curriculum in a quantifiable, measurable way. We certainly want to have input from the clients themselves, along with the judgment of the faculty member in each class. Assessment is difficult enough to accomplish in a standard classroom environment with lectures, learning goals and examinations. It's all that much more challenging in a 'hands on' situation like we have here — where every client and campaign is different, and client input is an important part of the formula for determining "success." So assessment is an issue we continue to wrestle with.

The technology area also needs further development. It's a struggle for faculty to be 'up' on the latest technology, because we typically don't get release time to learn new software applications or figure out how to integrate them into existing classes. One example of this is in the area of World Wide Web design. Our department gets lots of requests from potential clients for web design services, but we don't have enough students with sufficient skills to plug into those types of projects. We're still trying to figure out how to deal with supply and demand — how to prepare faculty, gear up the classes, free up the technological infrastructure and create a flow of qualified students out from those classes to further improve service to clients in the community.

Of course, all of this is not new. For decades, we've been struggling to define what journalism is in an academic context, how to fund it, and how to structure journalism programs to provide maximum value to the academy, our students, and the community at large (Swanson, 1999; See also Giardina, 1974). Today more than ever, journalism is being relied upon to turn out productive, critical thinkers who are media literate and technologically savvy — prepared for jobs ten years from now that do not even exist today. While we don't claim to have all the answers at Cal Poly, our "learn by doing" approach is serving us well as we work toward this end.

References


Douglas J. Swanson is an associate professor of journalism at California Polytechnic State University. He has been teaching at the college level since 1980, and has taught in New Mexico, Oklahoma, Wisconsin and California. He has more than 20 years of professional experience in broadcasting, print journalism and public relations. Swanson earned his Ed.D at Oklahoma State University in 1999, and earned his accreditation in public relations (APR) in 2003. He has an active research agenda and has published in several different academic journals. He is a member of PRSA, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and the Western Social Science Association.