Developing students’ research skills in the undergraduate public relations writing course: A framework for ‘real world’ success.

Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D APR

Available at: http://works.bepress.com/dswanson/63/
Too many students, not enough time or resources

Those of us who teach in higher education are in a time of continually diminishing resources. Our budgets have been cut, but our class sizes and teaching loads continue to increase. There’s an unceasing drumbeat from the profession to better prepare our students with social media skills demanded in the workplace (Cahill, 2009). In the education of public relations undergraduates in particular, there seems to never be enough time or resources for faculty to teach students all the new skills needed – let alone the basics. Outside of class, faculty struggle to find time for research. Our long-delayed projects sit gathering dust on the desk while we struggle with issues of class instruction. This poster session illustrates a curriculum component that can help on both accounts, by integrating a theory and research component into the basic public relations writing course.

Students' understanding of theory and research - an essential concept

Undergraduate students’ ability to proficiently comprehend and use theoretical models and research methodologies is among “essential” skills identified by the Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education (2006). But theory and research can be viewed as a non-technological and perhaps boring basic skill that can be either delegated to General Education or lost in the shuffle entirely as communications programs revamp their courses to address new technological realities.

Creating a win-win situation for undergraduates and the faculty member

Over the past 16 years, the author has taught undergraduate public relations writing at four different universities. He has developed a research practicum project module for the writing course that allows theory and research to be included in an integrated, professionally relevant way. Use of the module also allows for the labor of undergraduates to be utilized to help generate scholarly research productivity – another issue often lost in wake of ‘too many students, not enough time or resources.’

Elements of the research practicum project

1. Theoretical models
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
4. Data collection
5. Data interpretation
6. Reporting of results
7. Publication opportunities

Through involvement both individually and collectively with a ‘real world’ research issue, students gain practical knowledge and skills. The learning augments students’ developing knowledge of public relations writing, and puts the writing skills in a larger context that more adequately prepares students for later courses (e.g. PR Management or PR Campaigns) or internship.

Recent successes

In spring 2011, the author had three sections of a PR writing class. Each section successfully took on a different practicum project. All projects came to a successful conclusion in terms of student learning – and each project resulted in acceptance for peer-refereed journal publication within a year.
Hays, B. A., & Swanson, D. J. (___). Public relations practitioners' use of reverse mentoring in the development of powerful professional relationships (In press, PRism, Online Journal of Public Relations).

Swanson, D. J. (2012). Answering to God, or to Senator Grassley?: How leading Christian 'health and wealth' ministries' website content portrayed social order and financial accountability following a federal investigation. Journal of Media and Religion, 11(2), 61-77. DOI:10.1080/15348423.2012.688661


**The practicum project in detail – spring 2011 example**

**WEEK 1:** The project is built into the course syllabus. At the beginning of the semester, a class period is taken to introduce the students to the project and its component parts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMM 362 (04)</th>
<th>COMM 362 (05)</th>
<th>COMM 362 (85)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations Writing</td>
<td>Public Relations Writing</td>
<td>Public Relations Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MONDAY, 7 to 9:45 p.m</td>
<td>MON. &amp; WED. 11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m.</td>
<td>4 to 6:45 p.m.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Project summary:

**Reserve mentoring among public relations professionals**

To what extent do public relations professionals: (1) understand the concept of reverse mentoring, (2) use reverse mentoring within their workplace, and (3) perceive benefit from reverse mentoring in terms of knowledge development, skill acquisition, and general workplace productivity?

This project will involve the creation of a web-based survey that will be administered to PRSA-member public relations professionals throughout the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project summary:</th>
<th>Project summary:</th>
<th>Project summary:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reserve mentoring among public relations professionals</strong></td>
<td><strong>Evangelicals and financial accountability: Responses of involved stakeholders to the criticisms of the Grassley Report</strong></td>
<td><strong>Peer-to-peer mentoring within college student media</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U.S. Senator Charles Grassley of Iowa recently completed a three-year investigation with a 61-page report that suggests several prominent ministries are misusing their donations to enhance the wealth of their celebrity ministers. What has been the impact of Grassley's report on the ministries and the ECFA (Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability)? What has been the impact on other stakeholders, such as the Americans United for Separation of Church and State? How have the ministries reacted? (e.g., what has been their public relations action and/or response?) This project will involve a media content analysis, as well as an analysis of relevant existing documents (e.g., the Grassley Report) to determine the communications strategies at work.

This project will involve the creation of a web-based survey that will be administered to undergraduate college students throughout the United States who are involved in student media (newspaper, broadcast, public relations). CSUF students will not be surveyed, per the stipulation of the IRB application.

**WEEK 2:** Following a lecture and presentation of a handout addressing communications theory, students were asked individually to complete a review of four relevant theories and draft a memo of their findings. The assignment instruction is shown below.

**Assignment P#1** - This assignment will be written as a business memo of no more than two pages. The memo must be addressed to me and follow the general format/structure described in the handout I have provided. In the memo, you will identify four theories into which our research effort might fit. Use the theories handout that I provided for you. Briefly describe each of the theories you have chosen, and, for each, why it would be appropriate for this investigation. The last of the four theories should be the one you think best addresses our issue. This would be the theory you recommend that we use as the grounding for our research effort. For this final theory you will reference a peer-reviewed article that you have read in which this theory is applied. Your recommendation for using this particular theory will come at the end of the memo. You will tell me why the theory seems most appropriate – and why you believe it is better than the other three you mentioned previously. Make sure to list the article you read (in
APN format, please). This memo will be evaluated on quality of writing and persuasive skill, in addition to appropriateness of theories selected. (100 points)

**WEEK 3:** The P#1 memos were returned and discussed in class. Then, a lecture was given on construction and use of annotated bibliographies. Supporting handouts were provided. Students were then assigned to teams to discuss and create an annotated bibliography on a sub-topic related to the class project. The assignment instruction is shown below:

**Assignment P#2** - For this assignment, you will create an annotated bibliography of five sources. All sources must address some aspect of the subject we’re working on. (We’ll discuss this at greater length in class.) Three of the articles you use must be peer-reviewed articles; the other two may be general-interest articles or web pages. Follow proper annotated bibliography format (which we will also discuss in class). This memo will be evaluated on quality of writing and brevity/ clarity of explanation. (100 points)

**WEEK 4:** The P#2 annotated bibliographies were returned and discussed. Then, a lecture was given on information-gathering methods (survey, interview, focus group, laboratory study, content analysis, analysis of existing data, participant observation). Students were asked individually to complete a review of four different methods and draft a memo of their findings. The assignment instruction is shown below.

**Assignment P#3** - This assignment will be written as a business memo of no more than three pages. The memo must be addressed to me and follow the general format/structure described in the handout I have provided. The memo will profile four different information-gathering methods commonly used in journalism/public relations research. As you draft your memo, make sure you define the term that refers to each type of research. (In other words, tell me how the information-gathering method is operationalized.) Briefly discuss pros and cons of each method. Lastly, for one of the methods you discuss, briefly summarize a peer-reviewed article you read that used this information-gathering method. The articles do not have to specifically fall into the journalism/PR category – but they should fall into the larger category of ‘communication.’ (So focus areas such as interpersonal, intercultural, marketing, political communication, new technology, and others are all ok) This memo will be evaluated on quality of writing and accuracy of explanation. (100 points)

**WEEK 5:** The P#3 memos reviewing different information-gathering methods were returned and discussed. Then, a lecture focused on development of research questions – both general research questions and specific interview/survey questions. Students returned to their teams and developed a list of questions for the project that their class section was working on. The assignment instruction is shown below.

**Assignment P#4** - This assignment will be written as a business memo of no more than two pages. The memo must be addressed to me and follow the general format/structure described in the handout I have provided. [Sections 04 and 89]: Your memo will recommend five specific survey questions that you think should be asked of our Survey Monkey respondents. [Section 05]: Your memo will recommend five specific research questions that our research should attempt to answer. At the bottom of the memo, include – in APA format – the reference citations for two authoritative sources on survey research and/or research methods that you relied on to give you guidance in this area. This memo will be evaluated on quality of writing and accuracy of explanation. (100 points)

**WEEK 7:** The P#4 memos with suggested questions were returned, and a class discussion was held about research questions and survey protocol. Some of the suggested survey questions were built into a Survey Monkey page, and that document was shared and discussed. A discussion was held to identify populations for study. In the class section that was dealing with content analysis, a discussion focused on media content analysis methods. Students worked in teams in each class. See below.

**Assignment P#5** - [Sections 04 and 85]: We will be launching our Survey Monkey instrument this week. There will be an in-class activity to identify populations for survey (respondents that we will be contacting to participate). [Section 05]: There will be an in-class content analysis activity as we gather data. (100 points)

**WEEK 8:** Students were updated on the progress of the project since our last class meeting. A lecture/discussion focused on what research-based data from different types of studies can and cannot tell us.
WEEK 9: Students were updated on the progress of the project since our last class meeting. A lecture/discussion focused on outlets for publication – academic journals, trade publications, and general-interest media. Students completed an individual assignment as shown below.

Assignment P#6 - This assignment will be written as a business memo of no more than two pages. The memo must be addressed to me and follow the general format/structure described in the handout I have provided. In this memo, please identify three peer-reviewed and two general-interest publications where we might want to submit our findings for possible publication. For each of the publications, give a paragraph or so of description of the publication. Include such details as professional association sponsorship (if any), editorial review processes (as reported by the publication), typical subjects of articles contained in recent past issues, and so forth. This memo will be evaluated on quality and accuracy of writing, and appropriateness of recommendations. (100 points)

WEEK 12: The P#6 memos were returned and discussed. Depending on the class section in which they were enrolled, students were presented with either survey or content analysis data. A lecture/discussion was held about apparent trends, response rates (or) framing and consistency of media content. Students returned to their teams to complete a final assignment as shown below.

Assignment P#7 - Review the data thus far collected. Based on that review and your earlier work, develop a draft outline of how the results should be reported in research form. What’s the most interesting result(s) of our survey/analysis? What’s the least interesting? Each team will submit a rough outline. Outlines will be evaluated on appropriateness of recommendations. (100 points)

WEEK 14: At the end of the course, students individually submitted a final term paper summarizing an interview they conducted with a working professional in PR about the importance of theory and research in the profession. The paper was to address ‘applied research’ and discuss in detail how the professional makes pragmatic and ethical decisions in a technological profession undergoing rapid change.

Assignment weights

The seven component assignments (100 points each) + the term paper (300 points) = 1,000 points possible out of 4,000 points possible in the course.

The remaining points possible were split between other writing assignments (1,400), tests (500), a final exam (800), and an individual electronic portfolio of work (300).

Evaluation

Student evaluation data showed that the project – while initially perceived as a daunting task by students – was one of the most appreciated components of the public relations writing course.

- “This class turned out to greatly exceed my expectations. Everything I learned is extremely valuable to my future career.”
- “This class relates classroom experience and work with real-world workplace situations.”
- “Assignments encourage us to think outside the box.”
- “The class was very intense in terms of course load. However, I feel I have learned so much and have improved my PR writing.”

References
