Implementing elements of Schon's reflective practitioner in an undergraduate public relations program

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Abstract: While the internship unit in a public relations degree is often viewed as the foremost area of experiential learning it can fail to deliver significant learning outcomes for student and teacher. This paper explores the use of other activity-based learning (ABL) methods as implemented in the Deakin University public relations undergraduate degree. The paper applies Donald Schon's concept of the reflective practitioner to learning undertaken in an internship unit and compares this application to two other units where ABL is used and the focus is on creating a client-professional relationship. For the purpose of this paper information was analysed using the 2006 on-campus cohort only. The cohort was further refined to include those students who successfully completed the degree of BA in public relations. Student internship evaluation forms and unit records were viewed to gain statistical information.

Introduction

Those involved in educating for the professions in higher education are confronting a broad range of pressing challenges. In the current Australian environment university lecturers may have to deal with an increasingly diverse student population, decreased funding per student, and new information and communication technologies. Beyond these lies the more fundamental question of what should now count as a quality learning experience in professional education. What should a quality professional curriculum look like? How should it be taught and assessed? With so many more learning and teaching options available, what is the appropriate mix of media or technology underpinning the curriculum and its pedagogies? How can academic knowledge – the concepts, theories and principles that support public relations learning – be integrated with practical skills and knowledge to support the development of professional capabilities in students? In short, we argue that the
achievement of excellence in education for the professions demands a coherent and integrated view on the design of appropriate contemporary learning environments (Segrave & Holt 2003). Contemporary learning environments are defined, along with their characteristics, in support of excellence in professional education.

Deakin University’s Public Relations program, offered in the Faculty of Arts, is used as a case study to illuminate the key features of comparing the value of the internship method of study as compared to activity-based learning units (ABL) or as Tench and Fawkes term them “Live projects for external clients” (Tench and Fawkes in Theaker, 2008, pp10-11). These latter units allow the educator to make use of the advanced elements of Schon’s reflective practitioner as unit criteria.

The complete PR program is offered at undergraduate level and is taught at the University’s Geelong campus, in Victoria, Australia. The undergraduate program is taught to an annual intake of 45 to 60 students. The majority of students are on-campus and are predominantly full-time school leavers. Off-campus students are mainly mature aged and in paid employment. The ratio of on-campus to off-campus is about 5:1. The gender ratio of female to male students is 5.3:1

The learning environment

Wilson (1996) defines a desirable learning environment as ‘a place where learners may work together and support each other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of learning goals and problem-solving activities’ (p. 5). The teacher’s role in such environments is to provide appropriate tools, learning resources, communication and collaborative possibilities that allow students to actively construct their professional understandings and capabilities. The teacher guides, at times directs, and supports students’ engagement with the learning environment in pursuit of professional development. The student is encouraged to be an active learner, engaged with the array of learning possibilities in pursuit of the advancement of their professional conceptions and practices. This learning environment mirrors that identified by Wilson where the learning is ‘fostered and supported’ (Wilson 1996, p. 4).
Learning based outside the classroom environment of the university can be given many names: experiential learning, practicum, problem-based learning, industry-based learning, and field work. One of the learning events that captures and incorporates a range of academic and professional experiences is internship programmes.

The drive in graduate programmes to deliver experience-based units of study has many proponents; chiefly among them is graduate outcomes. Universities’ marketing staff follow up their recently employed graduates and seek to ascertain any shortcomings in their ‘product’. Kolb noted (1984, p. 6) there has been a “marked trend to vocationalism in higher education spurred on by… employers who feel that the graduates they recruit into their organisation are woefully underprepared”. Kirby (2005) encapsulates the major requirement of employers that they seek graduates that ‘can hit the ground running’. While employers may want the traditional academic traits that a university delivers, they also want graduates with knowledge of current practice.

One pedagogy for shaping learning environments relating to educating for professional competence is the practicum. As with many professional courses in higher education, the practicum is a strong feature of Deakin’s PR program. Schon (1987) defines the practicum as:

A practicum is a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context that approximates a practice world, students learn by doing, although their doing usually falls short of real-world work. They learn by undertaking projects that simulate and simplify practice; or they take on real-world projects under close supervision. The practicum is a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and risks of the real one, to which nevertheless, it refers. It stands in an intermediate space between the practice world, the ‘lay’ world of ordinary life, and the esoteric world of the academy. It is also a collective world in its own right, with its own mix of materials, tools, languages, and appreciations. It embodies particular ways of seeing, thinking, and doing that tend, over time, as far as the student is concerned, to assert themselves with increasing authority.
The work of the practicum is accomplished through some combination of the students’ learning by doing, her interactions with coaches and fellow students, and a more diffuse process of ‘background learning’. (p. 37 & p. 38.)

Deakin’s PR program internship runs a summer, out-of-academic-semester work placement, followed by an in-semester internship unit at the start of the final year of study. Prior to the internship unit, the public relations management unit is undertaken, where students must undertake a communication audit on a chosen organisation. Concurrently with the internship unit, a major fieldwork project is undertaken as part of a PR campaigns unit. The management and campaigns unit represent the ABL units of the program.

In the internship, recent developments have seen a strengthening of preparation for the work placement through more formal guidance on searching and selecting an appropriate placement, the keeping of a learning journal, and the preparation of a learning portfolio of significant PR assignment work undertaken over the course. The post-work placement experience through the internship unit of study is enhanced through reflective individual and group assignment work supported by online case resources and discussion spaces. The unit also provides prospective advice and insights into securing and performing well in one’s first job in the industry upon graduation. An issue of ongoing deliberation is the absence of formal academic teaching support during the work placement itself.

Some may consider, purely by nomenclature, that the public relations internship unit is the capstone of experiential learning. But it is the lack of quality control in intern placements – the “site integrity” (Bourland-Davis, Graham & Fulmer, 1997, p.2) that brings this value into question. Bourland-Davis et al. also note that the internship activity is “typically among the most difficult areas of academic work to judge” (1997, p.7). Units, however, with a blended learning environment of the ABL nature, can remove some of this difficulty, combine Wilson’s (1996, p.4) definition and allow:

- a greater development of practical experience
- an immediate work base
- a study-based environment in which to reflect on professional experiences
• the opportunity to be part of a client-professional relationship.

**Internship as learning**

From a 2006 unit cohort, Host Organisation Evaluation Forms (HOEFs) were analysed to determine (Appendix 1) the value of the intern experience. The form asks for the intern host to complete a number of qualitative statements regarding the performance of the student and then seeks to professionally grade their work. The limitations of the analysis mean that only intern hosts are examined. Student feedback is anecdotal and so cannot be used as an accurate predictor of the internship experience. In addition, as the cohort is based at a regional campus, the opportunities for internship placements can be restricted to the region although some students do undertake placements with metropolitan hosts.

Experiences as an intern can vary widely. For many students the internship opportunity to gain real-work life experience can often be reduced to an equivalent of the work experience undertaken at a secondary education level. A 1990 International Public Relations Association (IPRA) gold paper on Public Relations Education stated that although internships were important, the experience of the internship was ‘…not always successful’ due to ‘…a lack of adequate briefing by the supervisors… lack of willingness to spend sufficient time and attention to supervise the students’. In 2007 this issue still arises. Kelly’s (2007) research indicates that there are:

serious concerns that PR professionals responsible for an organisation’s internship program often abdicate responsibility for making those programs work at optimum levels and academics do not supervise students as closely as they should to ‘connect the dots’ between the classroom and real world (Kelly, 2007, p.10)

Anecdotal feedback for this paper indicates that these conditions still exist in some intern placements. In some instances host supervisors can be dismissive, or even ignorant, of the theories that underpin the work of the practitioner – emphasising doing as the only way of learning. Internship units can be to a large extent unstructured – the learning takes place in a physical and mental environment far from the academy. It often leads to a growth in the intern’s confidence in technical skill,
however it is difficult for the academic to measure growth in professional capabilities. Kelly once again states that:

At the heart of the internship issue is the lack of time supervisors spend with interns… faculty complain that employers don’t ensure that internships are formal learning experiences by making certain there is enough high-level interaction between the interns and skilled professionals….The second most frequently cited measure of quality, according to respondents, is the nature of work interns are called upon – or allowed – to perform. Being relegated to clerical duties in lieu of meaningful assignments does not a successful internship make (Kelly, 2007, p.13).

An analysis of HOEFs and anecdotal reports from students verifies Kelly’s statements.

The intern learning experience is fraught with quality control issues. The prestige or size of the organisation is no indicator of the quality of internship. The intern supervisor’s commitment can alter from year to year based on a simple matter such as staff turnover.

In addition the 160-hour public relations internship at Deakin is normally undertaken over the summer break between the second and third year of study. On return to study the ability to reflect may be dimmed by time (in 30 percent of the sampled cohort it had been up to five months since their internship) and the effect of the holiday period. To overcome the lack of a focus on professional capabilities the BA (Public Relations) course has attempted to strengthen the preparation for the work placement through more formal guidance on searching and selecting appropriate placement, the keeping of a journal and the preparation of a learning portfolio. Of the sample in this study cohort, 44 percent arranged internship through a personal contact or connection and 38 percent used cold calling. Only 18 percent used the services of staff to assist in finding their placement and often only as a last resort when other avenues had failed. In other disciplines the search for an internship is considered part of assessment.

The internship unit as it exists meets much of the criteria identified by author and professional education academic Donald Schon (1987, p. 37) who describes such activities as ‘… a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. In a context that
approximates a practice world, students learn by doing, although their doing usually falls short of real-world work. They learn by undertaking projects that simulate and simplify practice; or they take on real-world projects under close supervision.’ Schon’s definition reflects the shortcomings of internship units that such settings may provide more opportunities for forms of technical training, but not for the development of real professional capability.

Holt and Sheehan (2004, p. 28) do not deny the value of internships and state that internship (or practicum) experience is “A key pedagogy for shaping learning environments relating to educating for professional competence”. What is lacking in the internship experience is this contrast, and as such there lacks an opportunity to develop Schon’s ‘real professional capability’.

Internship units, as we have seen, are to a large extent unstructured whilst the learning takes place in a physical and mental environment far from the academy. It often does lead to a growth in the intern’s confidence in technical skills, but it is difficult, however, to measure the pedagogical value of the internship unit. One of the criteria of internship is duration and as mentioned in this paper the Deakin University internship is of 160 hours duration. Theaker (2008) points to research by Tench and Fawkes (2005) of preferred discipline topics PR employers and academics which highly ranks work placements, of one year’s duration. This same research indicates academics as viewing a two-week or three month work placement very lowly (Theaker, 2008, p10-11).

The BA (Public Relations) course seeks to go beyond the skill base and build on professional competency. The units of study that further this development are second level unit Public Relations Management and third level unit Public Relations Campaigns.

Creating the Reflective Practitioner – students as professional public relations consultants
The BA (Public Relations) course seeks to develop professional capabilities through the units public relations campaigns and public relations management. The pedagogy in these units is focused on ABL. Critical to Schon’s client-professional relationship is
the “willing suspension of disbelief” (p. 296). He explains that the client “… does not agree to accept the practitioner’s authority but to suspend disbelief in it… to join the practitioner in inquiring into the situation for which the client seeks help… The practitioner agrees to deliver competent performance to the limits of his (sic) capacity” (pp. 296-297). It could be argued that for a client to undertake an agreement with students requires a greater degree of disbelief than the ‘traditional contract’. However, students in the units public relations management and public relations campaign operate very much in the guidelines of the ‘willing suspension’ concept.

Schon (1983) contends in the reflective contract the professional opens his knowledge to public inquiry reflecting one of the major theories of public relations – Hunt and Grunig’s (1984) two-way symmetrical public relations model. The goal of two-way symmetrical communication is for parties to arrive at mutual understanding. This understanding is a primary requisite for parties engaging in a professional-client relationship. In taking on a role of actual client work the student receives at first hand a theory in practice experience and most likely without the client’s knowledge and awareness.

Mencher (1994) and Aldoory and Wrigley (2000) emphasise this by stating “that ‘actual client work’ placed reliance on real problem solving – students are put into circumstances where they deal with others as professionals”(Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000, p. 48).

In addition to gaining a reflective practitioner experience, students in the units PR management and public relations campaigns also undertake an ABL experience through consultation with clients. Raelin (2000) argues that work-based learning can be distinguished from traditional classroom learning in a number of important ways. Firstly, work-based learning is centred around reflection on work practices; it is not merely a question of acquiring a set of technical skills, but a case of reviewing and learning from experience. Secondly, work-based learning views learning as arising from action and problem solving within a working environment, and thus is centred on live projects and challenges to individuals and organisations. Work-based learning also sees the creation of knowledge as a shared and collective activity, one in which people discuss ideas, and share problems and solutions. Finally, work-based learning
requires not only the acquisition of new knowledge but the acquisition of meta-competence of learning to learn.

Students in the units public relations management and public relations campaigns meet Raelin’s (2000) criteria in a number of ways that also reflect Schon’s client-professional relationship. They engage with clients on a frequent – at least weekly – basis while undertaking their communication audit for the second level public relations management unit or third level public relations campaign unit. They are also required to workshop their progress with their cohort and tutor. This activity forces the student to reflect and report on what they have observed in their contact. Furthermore the workshop environment allows reflection on the application of public relations theories used in meeting the objectives of the organisation. The workshop engagement will also contribute to meeting objectives of their assessment – creating a meta-competence environment.

Assessment in activity-based non-internship units as a measure of building the client-professional relationship

Raelin’s criteria, outlined above, are echoed in the assessment of the non-internship units public relations management and public relations campaigns.

In both units students must recruit clients to meet assessment criteria. In some instances, in public relations campaigns, clients approach the unit chair seeking students to undertake a specific public relations campaign. The unit chair then suggests the campaign scenario to prospective students. Students can choose to undertake these opportunities or not.

In the assessment of both units work undertaken for clients is a significant proportion of marks. In public relations campaigns it is 100 percent and public relations management it is 60 percent. In both units the students must undertake a reflective exercise on the work they have undertaken for their client and on the nature of the client’s organisation.
Second Level - Public Relations Management

In this unit students must approach an organisation and seek to undertake a communication audit for that organisation. This initial activity requires thorough research of the organisation and the target public expectations of that organisation. Each week, for eight weeks, students report back in a workshop environment on the progress of their audit implementation.

The tutor acts as facilitator, seeking feedback from all groups in an attempt to expand the problem-solving culture of the cohort. While completing the audit students contemporaneously work on a theory essay that requires them to reflect on the concepts of public relations and their application to the chosen organisation and the audit itself. The audit and essay form the first piece of assessment. Assignments are submitted in week eight of semester.

Upon return to the student of this graded piece of assessment, further reflection is required on the assessor’s feedback. Students must then prepare for the final piece of assessment, a formal presentation in the form of a professional ‘pitch’, of their audit. The pitch presentations are conducted before two academic staff members and a public relations practitioner (normally a consultant) and to their cohort. Off-campus students submit a script of their presentation complete with PowerPoint slides and any other visual aids.

Third Level - Public Relations Campaigns

In the third level Public Relations Campaigns unit students are asked to prepare a public relations campaign proposal for an organisation. Students spend up to the first four weeks of the semester identifying, approaching and securing an appropriate organisation. Students are encouraged to source their organisations strategically, choosing sectors which are of interest to them as potential career paths (not-for-profit, sporting, corporate, local government, etc.). Campaign proposals focus around the identification of a problem which needs to be solved or upon an opportunity which can be capitalised. Students who are unsure of the professional sector they wish to work within are encouraged to prepare their campaign proposal for local not-for-profit organisations as a way of building links between Deakin and its local community in
The completed Campaign Proposal is a professional document which can be included in the student's portfolio for presentation to future employers. Students are assessed through three assignments.

The first is a pitch – on-campus students present to the entire public relations campaigns student cohort, and are assessed by two staff members and a public relations practitioner. The process reflects industry practice, the requirement of personal communication being a key skill for public relations practitioners. Off-campus students submit a script of their presentation complete with PowerPoint slides and any other visual aids. They are also able to submit audio files of their presentation should they choose to do so.

Assignments two and three are the Campaign Proposal and Campaign Kit respectively. The Campaign Kit comprises tangible tactical items which support the proposal such as media releases, newsletters, speeches, etc.

Whilst not a requirement of the unit, many students in the unit public relations campaigns remain involved with their chosen organisations, assisting with the implementation process, and gaining further valuable experience.

**Conclusion**

Educating for professional excellence in public relations represents a multi-faceted challenge as the Deakin case study illuminates. A formidable agenda for ongoing reflection and action is presented by new and diverse student groups; demands for greater flexibility even from those who study full-time on-campus; the pressures to find enduring educational value in corporate technology investments; the demands to deliver on graduate attributes that underpin student employability; and the problematising of the key concerns and issues of the field, increasingly with an international and global context. In such times of change and flux, it will be a continuing commitment to active participation in these debates and experimentation with different practices that will provide the best opportunities to advance the quality
of education for excellence in public relations practice. This demands continuous quality improvement across several related fronts, driven by a spirit of academic innovation.

The paper acknowledges that internships are recognised among the cohort, and potential students, as highly desirable. Correctly or incorrectly the value of internship is perceived positively and as an advantage to study and career, especially in the latter as a job placement opportunity.

It is in terms of knowledge application and the reinforcement of practices that the work-based learning units create a more lasting impression for student cohorts. Educators need to emphasise to their cohorts the value of work-based learning units and their potential of delivering employment and positive graduate outcomes. By creating learning opportunities external to traditional environments, students can be situated in scenarios that are more reflective of Schon’s ‘client-professional’ relationship. In this development they will have a degree of professional maturity that an internship unit often does not allow. In an attempt to bring a greater recognition of the work-based learning in the public relations management and public relations campaigns units and as a means of better reflecting the practical, industry-centred focus of the units’ title, it is suggested that the units now be named Public Relations Management Practice and Public Relations Campaigns Practice.

References


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