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A best practices service learning framework for the Public Relations Campaigns course

Audrey Wilson Allison[1]

Abstract: Public relations curriculum often incorporates professional experience for progressive skill development. In the traditional public relations (PR) campaigns course, students typically research, develop, and implement a strategic campaign for a community organization as the client. Service learning is an effective pedagogical approach for the PR campaigns course with value-added learning outcomes, such as critical thinking and civic engagement. Adapting a National Society of Experiential Education (NSEE) best practices approach helps integrate service and reflection components as learning components. The instructional framework presented in this article combines service and reflection principles with course and campaign planning, implementation, and evaluation. Using the best practices framework as foundational scaffolding, instructors can strategically select elements from the framework to build a customized course plan.

Keywords: service learning, civic engagement, public relations, nonprofit organizations

The essence of public relations is the strategic management of communication and relationships among organizations and stakeholders to achieve organizational goals, while serving and appealing to public interests. Service learning is a powerful pedagogical tool for experiential training in public relations courses. As a capstone course, *public relations campaigns*, helps students synthesize knowledge and gain a critical "skills set" in the key areas of research, problem analysis, strategic planning, audience segmentation, communication and messaging, and measurable evaluation (Daugherty, 2003; Texter and Smith, 1999; Turk, 2006; Wandel, 2005).

Developing a professional PR plan for a non-profit organization easily lends itself to a collaborative partnership for service learning (SL). In contrast to extracurricular volunteer hours, academic credit in the SL campaigns course is recognized for proposals addressing a problem or challenge critical to an organization's mission, relationships, and communication among its publics.

I. Opportunities for Service Learning.

Many non-profit agencies offer valuable civic support, housing, educational, or financial assistance with programming or direct aid. Yet, with limited budgets and staffing, the majority of small non-profits seldom contract with professional PR firms or veteran PR directors for

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research, issues management, media relations, fundraising, publications, etc. Public relations courses with service components offer assistance from senior-level students and provide "real-life" scenarios, rich with learning opportunities. As future PR practitioners, students also experience the demanding, complex, and multiple functions of public relations.

Students' PR service and follow-up reflection are enhanced not only by systematic inquiry, but insightful observation and service-oriented participation. Many PR educators would agree that most traditional campaigns courses typically require students to interact with the client organization, as a form of service. However, it is important to consider evidence of structured reflection practices that is characteristic of true service learning--documenting the critical link between theory (thinking) and practice (doing). Students need practical contexts to test their own rationale, through analysis, application, and critical reflection. Although service learning in communication courses is gaining "acceptance," an increasingly lack of reflection was documented in a study of communication departments (Oster-Aaland, Snellnow, Nelson and Pearson, 2001). "Fewer departments appeared to be diligent about providing essential elements of service learning such as finding meaningful service and required structured reflection" (2001, p. 348). The thoroughness of this process and the integration of service into the learning objectives, distinguishes service learning in PR from other skill-based courses, common in communication curriculum. Hence, this service learning framework for PR campaigns outlines service and reflective components, guided by an application of the National Society for Experiential Education "best practices" principles (NSEE, 2007) within three instructional modules or phases. This reflective, case-based essay highlights a course approach that is easily adaptable to other communication courses and other related academic disciplines. Furthermore, the best practices framework can be modified for more succinct or expanded application, based on student, the client organization, instructor and departmental needs.

Educational research affirms that most collaborative service learning outcomes, from student and faculty perspectives, are mutually beneficial (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996; Kutula and Threnhauser, 1999). Service learning enriches students' "appreciation and understanding of the interests of stakeholders and the importance of social responsibility"– a fundamental principle of public relations (Daugherty, 2002, p. 2). Bringle and Hatcher (1999) define service learning as a

> course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 180)

While new service learning classes typically require more preparation time and energy from faculty, studies indicate that this teaching approach is more intrinsically rewarding for them (Bell and Geleta, 2005, Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, Gibson, Kostecki and Lucas, 2001). It also offers third-party documentation (i.e. agency evaluation) of course effectiveness for a performance review or tenure dossier.

A well-implemented PR campaign has positive impact among stakeholders beyond the classroom. Community and campus constituents witness (1) strengthened organizational programs, (2) meaningful civic service from college students, (3) broadened multicultural experiences, and (4) credible and ethical PR efforts in practice, in the context of service learning. The following objectives are designed for a public relations campaign course using service learning pedagogy.

II. Course Objectives.

A. Learning Objectives.

Overall: To develop a public relations campaign plan for a local non-profit organization, experiencing the dynamics of the agency-client relationship through service-learning.

- To enhance personal citizenship through service and civic participation.
- To conduct research and organizational assessments addressing a specific PR problem and related situational variables.
- To implement an effective, "real-life" PR program with measurable objectives, strategies, and tactics.
- To enhance PR managerial skills (Clark, 1996).
- To evaluate campaign outcomes, identifying short and long term implications.

B. Teaching Objectives.

- To offer an interactive experience that encourages higher order learning, synthesis, reflection, and evaluation within the PR campaign course, adapting (NSEE) best practices as a pedagogical framework (Gibson, Kostecki and Lucas, 2001).
- To frame public relations as managerial function, emphasizing the processes and coordination of *R*esearch, *A*ction (program planning), *C*ommunication, and *E*valuation (RACE) in a capstone campaigns course. Highlight strategic opportunities for creative messaging and efficient integrated marketing communications (IMC) approaches (Berger, 1992).
- To promote the reciprocal merits of service learning among students, community, and college/university partners.
- To offer opportunities for multicultural exchanges and insight through service with multicultural clientele or diversity-based programming (Davi, 2006).

C. Learning Contexts.

The context of this learning framework is tri-fold, occurring within (a) theoretical and content-based instruction, (b) the actual campaign process, and (c) communication with "self" and others. Classroom instruction may be delivered through lecture, visual media, online supplements, discussion, and case study examples. The PR and mass media theories have more meaning when students apply the paradigms to solve real PR problems.

Service learning emphasizes critical thinking and not just productivity for service. For instance, rather than just creating a requested media (press) kit, students would first question the need for the media kit as an affordable and effective PR tool for the client. Additionally, they would consider message impact upon the target audience and fulfillment of a campaign objective in reflection exercises—the same kind of contemplation a PR practitioner would exercise. Hence, the idea in service learning is not just to "research" and "do" but to contemplate, articulate, communicate, assess, do, evaluate, and reflect.

The use of self-directed student teams offers collaborative learning, while simulating the reality of "agency life." The collective effort needed to bring the plan together requires students to function as a committed team, learning from each other's strengths, insights, and oversights (i.e. mistakes). Team interaction and productivity facilitates learning in a small group context. Within an organizational setting, the students work in tandem with the community partner, establishing measurable PR objectives and strategies for the campaign. In the process, students exercise time management, negotiate tasks, and engage in persuasive communication and group accountabilities--essential competencies for PR practice. Self-reflection exercises assess internal team performance, as well as any tangible PR products. As a result, students communicate and perform on multiple levels (i.e. intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational communication) while learning in multiple contexts.

III. Nonprofit Organizations and Agencies as Clients.

Nonprofit organizations or community agencies usually have the greatest need and flexibility to function as service clients. In exchange for a campaign plan, the organization agrees to help guide and supervise student teams and be receptive to their input. Note that the process used to select or approve clients should be just as critical as the selection of an appropriate textbook (Mikolchak, 2006). The organization itself really becomes an interactive case study for the student teams. The instructor typically selects the client organization prior to the course semester, allowing time to research a potential goodness-of-fit with the PR class. Texter and Smith (1999) affirm that early communication and planning meetings between the instructor and client representatives are essential to "determine the viability of the student-client partnership" (p. 166). The agency's participatory role is usually co-managed, guided by the instructor's assessment of student expertise, available resources, campaign objectives, and complexity. The client-class partnership helps facilitate the critical areas of career development and civic contribution through curriculum-based service.

IV. Service Learning Instructional Framework.

An effective PR campaigns course syllabus balances tested practices for course consistency with flexibility to meet different organizational needs. The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) "best practices" principles offers a detailed framework for service learning course development (Gibson, Kostecki and Lucas, 2001, NSEE, 1997). It is especially useful for faculty new to service learning or new to the profession. For veteran faculty, the framework can strengthen reflection components and learning documentation, which can be less apparent in traditional campaigns courses. Flexibility is gained by selecting applicable best practice elements that will meet desired learning objectives.

When the best practices approach is integrated into the PR campaign process and operationalized in the syllabus, it prompts students, the client organization, and instructor to assess the developing campaign and reflect upon the process. It also serves as an additional method to measure fulfillment of campaign objectives and client satisfaction with results.

The next section illustrates how the traditional PR campaign sequence can be aligned with the NSEE best practices framework. While the traditional campaign plan (Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron, 2001) is sequential and chronological, the best practices framework does not have to be. You can synthesize segments of the framework into the campaign process according to your personal teaching style and course objectives. The best practices principles represent educational values that should support, but not replace other essential syllabi components (e.g. course policies). Consider applying key elements from the following instructional outline to develop your own course plan, emphasizing a "best practices" standard for both service and reflection: adapted NSEE Principles of Best Practices: *Intention, authenticity, planning, clarity, orientation, training and mentoring, monitoring and assessment, and continuous improvement.*

A. Phase One – Service Mission, Course and Campaign Planning.

1. First, browse the web for a quick overview or refresher on service learning. This will help you envision effective, creative, and contemporary options for course design before preparing the syllabus. Campus compact (www.compact.org) for example, a national alliance of institutions promoting service learning, offers a wealth of information on service learning, full-text publications, and sample syllabi. Searching related links, you will find numerous academic reports, grant opportunities, and national associations offering teaching tips and instructional resources. Other online sources include the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (www.servicelearning.org), Learn and Serve America (www.learnandserve.org), and the Faculty Guide to Service-Learning (http://servicelearning.umn.edu/faculty/guidesl.html).
2. Articulate the course mission, objectives, and scope of the campaign project in an outline or first draft of the syllabus. Consider the complexity of the campaign project and required service in assigning other course tasks, such as individual papers, exams, and reflection exercises. Note that the student teams will also need to meet on-site with the client—a significant time management issue for students working full and part-time. One study of PR students completing a campaigns course documented a class average of (10) hours at the community site and (50) hours committed to the entire campaign process (Daugherty, 2003). The course plan should proportionally balance any textbook and trade publication readings, lecture, discussion, and journaling with sufficient time for team meetings and site visits. Consider designating 2-3 class periods as "flex days" to accommodate agency representatives as guest speakers or for extended class discussions.
3. Select a textbook, course literature, or develop a mini course packet that outlines PR principles and different types of PR campaigns, supporting the course objectives (Matera and Artigue, 2000). Sample campaigns, reflection exercises, campaign planning resources, and discussion forums can be offered online through WebCT Vista or Blackboard.
4. If possible, reserve a conference room (or classroom with movable tables and chairs) early in the prior semester for team meetings, during some of the class sessions. This will also be a convenient way to meet separately with each team to discuss work-in-progress and teach in the role of a "team consultant."
5. Consult a local community agency directory or network for potential clients a semester in advance. Ask agency directors about their interests, time, and qualified personnel to supervise and assist the class teams. Once a community organization is selected as the client, forward a copy of the syllabus and service agreement with a cover letter. The agreement should outline the responsibilities of the organization and student teams.
6. Consider both campus and organizational resources for a teaching, research, or library assistant; computer and software support, or funding. An online database workshop can help students prepare for initial campaign research. Many college libraries offer bibliographic research instruction that can be customized into a one-hour workshop.
7. Determine the service approach and integrate specific service activities into the syllabus. Establish course criteria for team service to the organization. Students can conduct a SWOT analysis, assessing the organization's internal strengths and weakness, and external opportunities

and threats. Each team should decide, based on their collective talents, how to divide project labor. A written statement outlining the team's accountability areas and client's areas in support of the campaign process emphasizes the professional magnitude of the project. You can highlight this commitment with an early reflection exercise.

8. Assign specific reflection exercises and allot course time accordingly. Formats for reflection assignments might include (a) group discussions in class and online, (b) short written reports offering feedback on work-in-progress, (c) essay exam questions, and (d) detailed journaling in different formats. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) offer three journaling methods that are particularly suitable for PR reflection: "Double-entry, critical incident" and key concept. These methods encourage more structured, analytical writing than personal diary-type journals.

In an inexpensive spiral notebook, students vertically divide journal pages under the headings of service and personal reflections for a double-entry journal. A student, for example, may interview the organization's director about the agency's history and public image. In a journal entry heading of service, he/she would summarize the interview questions and responses. Paralleling this entry would be the student's reflective heading, describing the research interview process, effectiveness and possibly the student's perceptions of the organization's image, compared to the director's perceptions. A humorous maxim used to question newsworthiness in PR is the "so what?" question. Expand upon this maxim in the journal exercises. Start with the "what?" and then "so what?" questions to validate an event as a critical incident. Apply "now what?" questions for follow-up and follow-through analysis. The key concept approach uses key PR principles and campaign elements as topics for journal reflection. Generate a key topics list from related course readings.

9. Create a back-up project plan, just in case the client withdraws support or participation. Select a similar agency (with a comparable mission and PR scope) to serve as an alternate client. For example, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America may present similar opportunities for PR service as Big Brothers Big Sisters. If the alternate client is not needed, the organization can serve as the client for the next course semester. Additionally if the campaign's initial area of emphasis (e.g. community awareness, fundraising, sponsorship, or advocacy) turns out to be a major misfit with the learning objectives, select a related area from the SWOT analysis to modify the campaign.

10. Align course instruction with the sequential order of PR campaign components: Situation, objectives, audience/publics, strategy, tactics, timetable, budget, and evaluation. [See also item # 14.] Ask students to maintain activity and time logs, tracking total service hours accordingly. Logs, organized to support or parallel the NSEE best practices phases, will help students to complete more insightful reflection assignments.

11. Begin an instructor's course journal, noting methods that worked well, need improvement, or should be dropped from the course plan. While the syllabus or handouts may outline project exercises, a journal will help the instructor recall personal observations from the actual course experience. Even brief instructor notes (daily or weekly) help strengthen the authenticity of faculty performance statements, departmental curriculum review, student team evaluations, and teaching scholarship.

B. Phase One Best Practices Application.

- *Intention* (desired outcomes): course mission, learning objectives
- *Authenticity* (real life experience): selection of clients, campaign focus and complexity

- *Planning* (mutual problem solving and decision making): course syllabus and service plan, team and client assessment of needed campaign and related priorities
- *Clarity* (mutual understanding of goals and expectations): service agreement and team accountability
- *Reflection* (conscious examination of experiences): designing and integrating appropriate reflection exercises, formal and informal instructional feedback

C. Phase Two – Course Delivery and Campaign Implementation.

12. Review course objectives and related service plan in a course overview. Detail specific criteria for service and reflection exercises within the first two weeks of class. Offer a previous campaign plan (with tangible elements) and reflection papers as course samples. (Secure written permission to showcase student work.) Collect and present news clips or other documented publicity highlighting the success or innovation of previous campaigns.
13. Coordinate the student team member selection process. If students possess a close range of expertise, choose teams randomly in class (by alpha order or numbers out of a hat). Instead of teams electing a group leader or account manager immediately, offer a brief opportunity for emergent leadership to prevail.
14. Monitor students' contact with the agency and confirmation of an orientation or first organizational meeting. The community organization and student teams should discuss expectations and both sign a joint letter of agreement or comparable form outlining responsibilities. Begin the service and instruction of campaign components with the following sequence: Situation, objectives, audience/publics, strategy, tactics, timetable, budget, and evaluation (Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron, 2001). [See also item # 10.]
15. Adapt your teaching style to facilitate active learning, using a mentoring approach, serving in a consulting role. Instructors may feel a sense of tension between controlling course direction and empowering students and client to "self-direct" the learning process. Howard (2001) suggests that instructors rely less on a transmission model of instruction and more on integrated approaches that guide, rather than dictate student learning.
16. Use reflection exercises as intermediate checkpoints to evaluate service and both completed and ongoing segments of the campaign plan. Return evaluated or graded reflection exercises as quickly as possible. Require teams to submit a final draft for review, prior to the final client submission. Offer evaluative comments, referencing PR theory and effective application.
17. Require all final written campaign plans to be submitted at the same time, even if the team presentations are scheduled for different days. This extends the same amount of time to all teams, regardless of an extended presentation schedule.
18. Refreshments at a reception or a celebratory dinner acknowledge the semester-long efforts of both students and client.

D. Phase Two Best Practices Application.

- *Clarity* (mutual understanding of goals and expectations): establishing campaign objectives that are SMART (specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and results-oriented, and time-targeted), committing the student team to a specific plan
- *Orientation* (becoming acquainted with service-learning environment): assessing internal and external communication, learning organizational culture, and agency programs

- *Training and Mentoring* (instruction and support): adapting a coaching and mentoring instructional approach, students' accessibility to instructor and community partner
- *Monitoring and assessment* (ongoing appraisal for desired outcomes): course standards and grading criteria, exams and evaluation methods, incorporating agency feedback
- *Continuous Improvement* (ongoing adjustment to achieve desired outcomes): revising or restructuring students service and campaign plans
- *Reflection* (conscious examination of experience): evidence of critical thinking, effective strategic planning, problem solving, and communication in reflection exercises
- *Acknowledgement* (recognition of learning, accomplishments): recognizing work in progress, acknowledging intermediate accomplishments and success
- *Evaluation* (determining if and how course outcomes were met): evidence of desired outcomes in campaign project, feedback for improvement

E. Phase Three – Service, Campaign and Course Evaluation.

19. Complete an objective evaluation for each team immediately after presentation, to remember oral points and questions that may not be addressed in the written campaign plan. Allow other students to critique the presentation with informal comment cards. Assess the team's internal evaluation of the submitted campaign plan.
20. Solicit client feedback at the campaign presentation and in a follow-up letter addressed to student teams. Evaluations on formal letterhead can be included in students' portfolios. Ask client's willingness to participate in future service learning courses. Secure periodic course evaluations from students and client.
21. Evaluate total service hours. Based on course outcomes, maintain or revise course criteria and resources accordingly. Are students and client spending sufficient time and resources to accomplish shared goals? Is the amount of required site time and service realistic for the student population or relevant community conditions (commuter students, evening class time, community adversity, or crisis)?
22. Analyze student course evaluations relevant to cognitive, civic, and professional learning outcomes. You can (re)design project and reflection exercises based on the learning objectives. Discuss with students how the learning outcomes might reflect transferable job skills and professional attributes (e.g. time management, social responsibility, and leadership).
23. Note actual and potential problems encountered and corrective actions. Is student-client communication interactive (or one-way), timely, and educational? Are problems or errors quickly addressed? How is accountability maintained? What "checks and balances" exist?
24. Prepare and disseminate a related news release highlighting the course's successes for potential media coverage in campus and community media outlets, departmental and organizational newsletters, and websites. Any generated publicity will be useful to all parties to document impact and include in professional portfolios and organizational archives.

F. Phase Three Best Practices Application.

- *Continuous improvement* (ongoing adjustments to achieve desired goals): highlight applications for life-long learning in PR industry, note impact of organizational service and projected results, discuss internal organizational follow-up

- *Reflection* (conscious examination of experience): evaluation of team's working relationship with client, learning outcomes, personal growth, and professional insight
- *Acknowledgement* (recognition of learning accomplishments and course challenges): client and instructor feedback, approved campaign plan, effectiveness of campaign implementation, and course celebration activity

V. Conclusion.

A. Assessment of Student Reflection and Learning Outcomes.

Evidence of positive learning outcomes should be assessed in a variety of ways from the instructor and client, including written reviews, verbal feedback, quantitative measurement, and observation. When plausible, students should have service opportunities and reflection exercises designed to demonstrate critical thinking, progressive thought, values clarification, and ethical decision-making. The learning outcomes from this service learning course can be categorized as cognitive, professional, and civic. Cognitive outcomes include improved communication skills, critical thinking, decision-making, strategic planning, problem solving, and evaluation. From a PR perspective, the professional and civic outcomes reflect ability to clarify and test organizational values and assumptions that later guide practitioner behavior. Students' retention of course concepts is enhanced by increased interaction with other students; discussion and implementation of PR concepts and strategies throughout the semester. Since a representative from the course's community partner writes an evaluation, it also gives the instructor a third-party critique of teaching effectiveness and student efficacy.

While the majority of student experiences are positive, it is important to communicate the limitations of the service component to help minimize conflict or error. No course plan, regardless of how strategically keen, delivers perfect outcomes. All parties should consider and adjust to unanticipated variables and negative circumstances. Consistent with PR ethics, students and client must adhere to ethical practices, avoiding for example exaggeration, deception, conflict of interests, and other actions that might result in public mistrust. *The Professional Bond*, a report from the Commission on Public Relations Education (Turk, 2006), states that

> [p]ublic relations practitioners have an unquestionable moral obligation to act professionally, i.e., in a socially responsible manner, within their own societies as well as within an emerging global community. To do so, the community of public relations professionals, both practitioners and educators, must publicly define their relationship to society as earning a position of trust. (p. 23-24)

The professional values of advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness are highlighted in the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Member Code of Ethics (PRSA, 2000).

B. Service Learning Implications.

Service learning courses document team and individual student productivity and professional service to an organization. A portfolio developed from the course presents tangible evidence of the learning experience in a professional format for potential employers. A service learning approach helps fulfill the critical student career development objective within PR curriculum, while also serving community and civic needs. Additionally, an assessment study of class reflection statements (O'Hara, 2001) reported that students "felt more socially responsible, and were more inclined to assume future leadership roles in their communities" (p. 261).

The course framework also allows students to experience a professional contract relationship and document their performance. This is particularly cogent to students planning to pursue entrepreneur or free-lance opportunities in a variety of fields. Furthermore, the course approach enhances time management skills—an essential attribute for a successful career in corporate and organizational environments. Conceptualizing these learning outcomes as transferable skills, the NSEE best practices approach can be adapted to many other academic disciplines, such as business management, political science, social work, and environmental studies. Service-based courses may include, for instance, accounting or operational audits, marketing analyses, political action networks, child safety programs, and ecology projects, respectively.

Public relations practitioners in particular are now charged with the specific mission of creating comprehensive and mutually beneficial community programs. Employers want PR professionals who can develop meaningful civic agendas that elevate the corporate image. This course design helps PR students to be more competent and confident in approaching such a mission. Hence, students not only read about PR and social responsibility in the text, they live it and reflect upon it through academically-strategic and meaningful, service learning.

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