

2005

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Recommended Citation

Penning, Tim (2005) "Questioning Assumptions: Why Teaching Public Relations is Consistent with Liberal Education," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol28/iss1/21>

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Questioning Assumptions: Why Teaching Public Relations is Consistent With Liberal Education

While practitioners of public relations today define the profession as a function of mutual relationship building, the mere mention of the term “public relations” can still engender a negative response. Casual observation and anecdotal evidence suggest that public relations as a profession is often minimized or demonized. PR can be seen as nothing more than attempts to garner publicity and attention, or in a worst case, the profession can be seen as deliberate efforts of deception. Words like “spin” are associated with the profession, and public relations activities are described as “just” PR. Media accounts of public relations activities often use the term as a negative adjective, as in “public relations gimmick” or “public relations scandal.” Formal research bears out the anecdotal perceptions of the PR profession. A recent study by media analysis firm CARMA, in association with the industry journal *PR Week*, shows a high volume of news stories about the profession carrying negative themes such as “PR distorts reality,” “PR just means publicity stunts,” or “PR pros are just spin doctors” (Frank, 2004). The study analyzed content of 698 print and broadcast media stories from January through July of 2004. Meanwhile, Callison (2001) concluded from a national study of the general public that public perception is negative toward public relations practitioners and the industry as a whole.

The view of public relations within academia is often as unfavorable or more so than that of society

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at large. Some of this has to do with an often antagonistic relationship between journalism and public relations educators. Research suggests the root of this problem is that many PR practitioners come from the ranks of journalism, and that journalists only see media relations, a small but visible part of public relations, as the essence of the profession. But while some have perceptions that minimize PR as a single tactic, others actually demonize the profession for being unscrupulous and dishonest in intent. As Shaw and White (2003) assert, "A common stereotype is that all public relations practitioners are for-hire communication technicians whose aim is to get media coverage for their organization at any cost."

Of course, as with any stereotype, this attitude towards PR has a kernel of truth likely based on several bad examples of PR practice. But as a whole the "spin" label on the profession is simply inaccurate. More often than not, behavior labeled as "just PR" was conducted by someone other than a legitimate (and liberally educated) public relations practitioner. As Dan Millar of the Institute for Crisis Management points out, 75 percent of all crises are caused by management (Millar, 2000). It begs the question why we don't more often read or hear the phrase "management scandal" or "just management." At the same time, it could be reasonably argued that "spin" is a by-product of politicians, and deceptive double-speak the domain of the legal profession. Nonetheless, the sins and spins of others are ascribed without justification to the public relations.

As bad as that stereotype may be in society in general, it is ironic that such an uninformed view could persist in the academy, in which attitudes are supposed to be formed in more thoughtful fashion. Indeed, in institutions such as our own where liberal education is so highly valued, it seems appropriate to question some assumptions about the public relations profession and its place as an academic discipline. In fact, more than merely defend the right to teach public relations, this paper will assert that public relations as a discipline is consistent with and exemplary of liberal education.

Ideals Of Liberal Education

To set the framework for that assertion, it is instructive to review the ideals of this notion of a liberal education and the mission of a liberal arts institution. Cronon (1998) reminds us that the Latin origin of liberal is "liber," meaning "free." Roots of the word liberal also go back to the Old English "leodan," meaning "to grow," and "leod," meaning "people." The Greek "eleutheros" also means "free," and in ancient Sanskrit the word "rodhati" translates into "one climbs" or "one grows." Cronon concludes that freedom and growth are at the core of liberal arts education.

Cronon explains that to achieve that growth and freedom the medieval notion of liberal arts education demanded courses in seven subjects: grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. But he stresses that liberal arts education should be more than a prescribed list of courses. Instead, he equates liberal education with a list of ten personal qualities a liberally educated, free-thinking person should possess. Among these characteristics of liberally educated people are that they: listen and hear, read and understand, write clearly and persuasively, rigorously seek truth, practice humility and tolerance, nurture and empower people around them (Cronon, 1998).

Similarly, Nesteruk (2004) describes a liberally educated person as a "free individual, capable of arriving at his or her own conclusions about controversial moral issues." He stresses that educators need to teach students to think for themselves, and understand that when we do there will not always be unanimous agreement on all issues. But in this environment created by liberally educated individuals, which Nesteruk likens to

a conversation, he envisions that individuals will have a disposition towards others, a tolerance of difference, respect for the dignity of all, and an understanding of the reciprocal engagement in the “conversation of life.”

These ideals of liberal education articulated by Cronon and Nesteruk are resonant in similar standards for public relations education.

Ideals Of Public Relations Education

Public relations education traces its history back to 1923, when Edward L. Bernays taught the first course in public relations at New York University (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000) at a time when the profession was just emerging in the United States. Rex Harlow, a professor in Stanford’s School of Education considered by many to be the “father of PR research,” was the first to teach public relations classes on a regular basis in 1939. That same year he founded the American Council on Public Relations, which eventually became the Public Relations Society of America (Wilcox, et al, 2001). There has been phenomenal growth in the field since. In 1999, 12,068 degrees were awarded in advertising, public relations or combined advertising/public relations programs. Nearly 40,000 students were taught by 941 faculty in that year, and the numbers continue to increase (Johnson and Ross, 2001).

With the growth in the profession and in academic programs in public relations has come a focused attention on the necessary components and qualities of public relations education. Education in the profession, in the sense of universities offering full majors in public relations versus just a few courses as part of a journalism or communication department, is relatively new. The Public Relations Society of America includes an Educators Academy as one of its membership sections. The national organization also established a Commission on Public Relations Education, which has issued several reports, most recently in 1999. That report recognized that PR education is an example of what Clark Kerr, former chancellor at the University of California at Berkeley, had in mind when he noted that the university should be the “chief port of entry” for new professions, and those that are becoming more professional (Kerr, 1995). In other words, in order for public relations to truly be a profession, it must ensure that future practi-

tioners have an appropriate education. Appropriate education of PR professionals is defined by the PRSA commission as “grounded in the liberal arts and sciences; well-prepared in public relations theory and practice; tested not only in the classroom but in the field; understanding the inherent connection between public relations and management, sociology and many other pillars of modern society; but also with the necessary skills—writing, analyzing, thinking—sharpened and ready for use” (Public Relations Society of America, 1999).

That’s a foundation for public relations education that clearly shares the spirit of a liberal education expressed by Cronon and Nesteruk. The commission went on to make specific recommendations for necessary knowledge and skills that should result from a quality (i.e. liberal) education in public relations. Recommended knowledge includes communication and persuasion concepts, strategies, and theories; relationship building; societal trends; ethical issues; and multicultural and global issues. Skills range from research to management, persuasive writing and speaking, visual literacy, and applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity. In addition to recommending a slate of specific courses in a typical public relations major, the report stressed that 60-75 percent of a public relations major’s courses should be in the liberal arts, social sciences, business, and language courses (Public Relations Society of America, 1999).

These recommendations were subsequently supported by a study of public relations students and professionals who were asked about their

expectations of public relations education. A survey of 258 PR professionals and 2,038 PR students across the nation showed that skills and attributes expected or desired at graduation included critical thinking and problem solving, strategic thinking ability, awareness of social trends, and a liberal arts background (Pritchard, 2001).

It is easy to understand these prescriptions and expectations for public relations education when one more fully understands the public relations profession.

Assumptions And Reality About The Public Relations Profession

Some of the stereotypes about public relations mentioned in the introduction to this paper still persist. However, the perceptions of the profession are getting increasingly more positive. For instance, Callison (2003) noted that PR practitioners fared no worse than other organizational professionals, such as managers and lawyers, in the view of the general public. Similarly, Shaw and White (2003) conclude that “journalism educators displayed more agreement with positive statements about public relations than the literature or anecdotal evidence would suggest.” And Frank (2004) shows in the *CARMA/PR Week* study that news media stories about the PR profession also increasingly carry positive themes such as “PR dispels rumors,” “PR helps rebuild image,” and “PR educates the public on worthwhile causes.”

This improving understanding and reputation of public relations is in part due to the proliferation of public relations education programs, and the fact that many PR programs are multidisciplinary. This results in an increasing number of other professionals—in business, government, and the nonprofit sector—who have a more informed and appreciative view of the public relations profession.

In fairness, the improving image of PR also results from the profession’s own efforts at improved behavior. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has been tireless in its advocacy for the profession, which includes support of education programs, a push for accreditation in public relations for professionals (APR), a revised Code of Ethics in 2000, the launch

of a diversity initiative in 2004, and ongoing professional development programs. This all comes as part of the culmination of what Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) call a third era in the evolution of the public relations profession in this country. The first era, in which the profession was called “press agency,” was characterized by hype and cheap stunts to garner press attention (parallel to yellow journalism and jingoism of that time). The second, “publicity,” era, still focused on media relations but saw an increasing push for honest portrayal of newsworthy events. The final era, called “counseling,” sees public relations blossoming beyond merely a communication tactic into a strategic function, or even a unique organizational paradigm. In other words, PR today is a management function. Public relations professionals are trained to not merely suggest what management should say but to advise management on what they should *do*. Gone are the days when PR pros are called in to clean up a management mess. The common mantra PR pros utter to management today is this: “you cannot communicate your way out of something you behaved your way into.”

Today, the most widely accepted definition of public relations is “...the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and all of the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 2000). That means public relations professionals do not just communicate management decisions. Rather, their function is to help make those decisions and offer an independent voice in management boardrooms. It means that decisions are made within the framework of mutually beneficial relationships, recognizing that sometimes an organization must be convinced to change its own behavior because of the interdependent nature of genuine relationships. This definition also recognizes that PR serves as a voice for publics who are not normally considered, especially those who are not “customers” but who are nevertheless affected by organizations.

While there is a whole body of literature that would help readers question—and in fact, put to rest—some assumptions about public relations, it is Grunig’s (2003) notion of two-way symmetrical communications that best illustrates the modern ideal for the public relations

profession. Two-way communication, of course, means that PR practitioners listen to their various publics. But symmetrical takes it further and ensures that the public can originate that communication, that they have an equal say in dialogue and an equal opportunity to change the behavior of organizations with whom they have a relationship. This model calls for PR professionals to listen to public opinion not to more intelligently “dupe” or deceive and thus achieve selfish objectives. Rather, it means that the PR profession, perhaps more than any other, plays a role in ensuring honest dialogue and even advocating for change on the part of an organization to serve the public interest.

To be sure, this ideal form of PR is not ubiquitous in practice. But it is increasingly evident thanks in large part to the efforts of PR educators and PRSA. In particular, the new PRSA Code of Ethics taught in professional development seminars and college classrooms works to embed liberal ideals in professional PR practice. The code has as its foundation these six “values”: advocacy (the role of advocating a point of view in society); honesty (seeking and representing truth); expertise (practice should be based on acquired knowledge and skill); independence (PR professionals have the ability to “speak truth to power;” to think critically and counsel based on principle); loyalty (to those we represent); and fairness (in competition and debate). Upon these foundational values rest the provisions of the code: free flow of information to all publics; full disclosure of information; competition that recognizes rights of alternative views and goals;

safeguarding the confidences of those we represent; avoiding conflicts of interest; and enhancing the profession with our personal behavior.

Because public relations is not a licensed profession, the code of ethics cannot be enforced. So PRSA has instead adopted a model of “inspiration,” and seeks to encourage positive, ethical, enlightened practice since it has no leverage to punish bad practice. This effort of inspiration of public relations professionals is noticeably congruent to the ideals of liberal education held forth to inspire positive, socially-conscious behavior in students of any profession or discipline.

Connection Between PR And Liberal Education

Edward L. Bernays is called by some the “father of public relations” because he was among the first to practice it and use that name for the profession. He is also maligned by some in academia who question the legitimacy of his early campaigns and tactics. However, it is instructive to note how Bernays’ own ideas evolved along with the field. Later in life he defended his 1955 book “The Engineering of Consent”:

Public relations practiced as a profession is an art applied to a science, in which the public interest and not pecuniary motivation is the primary consideration. The engineering of consent in this sense assumes a constructive social role. Regrettably, public relations, like other professions, can be abused and used for anti-social purposes. I have tried to make the profession socially responsible as well as economically viable (Wilcox et al, 2001).

In 1992, when he was 100 years old, Bernays addressed the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and made an impassioned plea for licensure of the field. His concern was that anyone could use the term “public relations” to describe what they do, whether honest PR practice or not. He also equated university education in public relations with the legitimate development of PR as a respected profession: “The needs of a vocation combined with the needs of a society dictate the educational requirements for the particular field of study” (Gonders, 2004).

Eight years later, when PRSA revised its code of ethics, the equation of the needs of a profession to the needs of a society was obvious. The rationale for the values and provisions of the new code are replete with this phrase: “to ensure informed decision making in a democratic society.” The attention to informed decision making is striking when compared to Nesteruk’s (2004) ideal of a liberal education serving to teach students to think for themselves. Similarly, his notion that liberally educated individuals have a disposition towards tolerance and reciprocal engagement is exemplified by PR practitioners and educators who strive for Grunig’s ideal of PR being two-way, symmetrical communication. Nesteruk’s acknowledgment and approval that liberally educated people will not always agree is matched in PR’s ethical role as advocates for voices and opinions overlooked by the media and other institutions in a democratic society.

At the same time, Cronon’s (1998) notion of a liberally educated person being characterized by someone who can listen and hear, write and persuade, seek truth, nurture and empower people, and show humility and tolerance are consistent with the recommendations made by the Commission on Public Relations Education (Public Relations Society of America, 1999). The emphasis on knowledge and skills pertaining to societal trends, ethical issues, multiculturalism, communication theories, relationship building, visual literacy and so forth are clearly liberal in their scope and intent. A public relations education by such standards *is* a liberal education.

In short, public relations practitioners give voice to those unheard, question assumptions and prevailing views, raise and champion alternative perspectives, and promote tolerance of differences in the “conversation of life.” Some detractors unthinkingly consider PR practice to be “spin” if they don’t agree with it. But a liberal thinker would be encouraged to consider PR as a prompt for critical thinking on issues of public debate. In a sense, the PR professional is to society what a good, liberally minded professor is to a classroom.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In the spirit of liberal education, it is possible that professors in fields of business, sociology, political science, philosophy and many others could include a discussion of public relations in their classroom. There are several resources to facilitate such discussions:

- The PRSA Code of Ethics is available online at www.prsa.org
- The PR Museum includes a variety of information about the history of public relations at www.prmuseum.com
- The Arthur Page Society, named for a man considered by many to be another “father” of the field, includes helpful principles about the practice of public relations at www.awpagesociety.com
- The Institute for Public Relations includes various academic articles and resources about public relations at www.instituteforpr.com

Adding a discussion of public relations, versus summarily dismissing the profession, could add a healthy dimension to a variety of classroom discussions and topics across a university campus. An honest review of the role of PR in organizations and society would have immediate and practical benefits in numerous disciplines. Doing so would also be an excellent way to demonstrate the ideals of liberal education.

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