S Verwey
DR Benecke
C Muir

Purpose and practice:
Educating PR professionals for the future

ABSTRACT

Business thinking, engagement with stakeholders, and the practice of public relations have all been confronted with major paradigmatic shifts – especially as these are contextualized by environments that are increasingly pluralistic. This has contributed to an important question into what the education of future public relations practitioners (PRPs) should be so that they can purposefully and successfully navigate and negotiate the challenges of decision-making – that are ethical and moral in nature – in the context of complex, and diverse practice. In light of this, public relations curriculum developers and educators are challenged to address issues of purpose, values-based practice and education in order to prepare future PRPs for the ethical and moral challenges that they will encounter. In the South African context this is further complicated by the recent calls for decolonisation of South African public relations curricula. This conceptual and exploratory paper addresses the issue of practice in an age of purpose, the changing roles of public relations practitioners, and the contribution values-based education can make in addressing demands for revised, and decolonised PR curricula.

Prof Sonja Verwey is Head of the School of Communication at the University of Johannesburg. René Benecke is senior lecturer, and Clarissa Muir a lecturer in the Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. This article is based on a paper presented at the 2017 PRISA Conference in May 2017.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate leaders ingreasingly recognise the relevance of a shared organisational purpose – and, with this, shared values – amongst their employees. This is because this organisation purpose, and shared vision allows for challenges to be dealt with successfully, as well as for organisational transformation (Keller, 2015). Here, organisational purpose refers not only to what an organisation wants to achieve as a business – but to a definitive delineation of the difference that such an organisation wants to make within the environment that they are situated. This means that the organisation should define who they are, what their instrinsic values are (beyond their offered products or services), and what they stand for.

Following from this, a higher organisational purpose should guide and illuminate its path in that it defines and determines both individual and organisational activities – that is, communication, creativity, culture, innovation, policy, processes, and structure – as well as change, growth and performance (Baker, 2017). As explained further by Rumbsy (2016), such a higher organisational purpose is the basis for decision-making and planning; the connective thread between operations and stakeholders; the heart and soul to connect more meaningfully with the people who matter.

However, as argued by Verwey (2010), communication practitioners are currently at an inflection point where they are faced with new emerging realities, and forms of organising. The implication of this is that these practitioners are situated in challenging contexts, and that there is often a redefenition of their roles. This also means that in these redefined roles they must act virtuously, and – based on personal values – have a conception of good that they identify with, and work towards. It is important that this – although also informed by personal purpose – is accepted by, and aligned with the higher organisational purpose and general professional values (Harrison & Galloway, 2005).

Challenges to counsel on ethics further impact on this, in that it is difficult to guide organisations and practitioners at times. This is because the contexts and environments in which they function are often messy, unclear, and undefined – and, as such, ethical guidelines cannot be implemented universally (Holtzhausen, 2015).

The implication of this is that these organisations and practitioners must act on a moment's notice, and depend on their own initiative. This, however, also means that the decisions of practitioners – as informed by their personal values – can lead to results and/or situations that are unethical and unexpected (Best & Kellner, 2001). More so, because these practitioners are also presented with decisions and ethical issues and problems that did not exist previously.

It is further important to note that the nature of practice is informed by a particular situation. This means that practitioners are, in reality, "situated differently in multiple ways, at different times" (Holtzhausen, 2012: 51). Like members of society, practitioners thus adopt different and fragmented identities, and enact multiple roles simultaneously. This suggests that, depending on their roles and situatedness, they may also have fragmented ideas and views.

In this way, a change in focus to individual responsibility from a focus on organisational responsibility has its challenges when it comes to ethical practices. These challenges, in summary, concern the delineation of ethical guidelines (what ethics will be followed?), and ethical guideline measures (how is it determined whether something is ethical or not?) – both for the individual, and the organisation. These challenges, from a perspective that is postmodern, cannot be responded to universally because ethics cannot be implemented universally. There is a focus, instead, on individual responsibility.

The implication of this is that when practitioners respond to situations – and for their decisions to be ethical – they must assume individul responsibility, and depend on their ethics and personal values (Holtzhausen, 2015). A case demonstrating the importance of this, is the Bell Pottinger incident. This incident recently resulted in debate about the ethical practices of the PR industry, with demands for increased individual and professional responsibility – both internationally and locally. The general sentiment amongst media representatives and the PR industry in South Africa was that this UK based PR agency acted unethically in pursuing the individual interest of their clients. However, concurrently the International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO) awarded Lord Bell, the founder of Bell Pottinger, an honorary place in their Hall of Fame for his outstanding contribution to the public relations industry. Such opposing actions and perceptions are at the core of the current moral dilemmas facing PRPs, their ethical leadership, and the purpose of the organisations they represent.

1.   A PURPOSEFUL VALUES-BASED APPROACH TO PR PRACTICE

One of the biggest challenges that PRPs face is to demonstrate and prove that the new ways of thinking, and new practices are indeed founded on ethical principles. These individuals need to serve as the ethical conscience of the organisation. As explained by Neill and Drumwright (2012: 221) an ethical or organisational conscience can be defined as "a professional who raises concerns when his or her organisation's actions might bring about potential ethical problems leading to troubling consequences for various parties, who may be individuals, groups, organisations...both within and outside the organisation." The relevance of this becomes apparent when one considers that the practice of public relations is increasingly characterised as one where scholars, and industry leaders have called on practitioners to provide ethical council within their organisations (Neill & Drumwright, 2012).

As a result, the question is raised by Holtzhausen (2015) as to how PRPs can serve as ethical counsel without any moral directive from others, particularly in an institutional context. "The reality is that not every moment of every day is filled with ethical choices. Most of what practitioners do takes place within boundaries of laws, rules, and role expectations" (Holtzhausen, 2015:1). Mourkogiannis (2014) argues that is of the utmost importance that the individual practitioner within the current business environment aligns personal, moral, and commercial values in order to ensure success. Olasky (in Harrison & Galloway, 2005) emphasises that the PRPs, in effect, remain free to favour the values which best serve their career and employment prospects.

There is a growing focus on the relevance of the practitioner's personal values and how personal values have become imperative in the practitioners everyday practice. This is echoed by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA), who recognise the limitations of set codes of conduct in the preamble to its Guiding Principles for the Ethical Practice of Public Relations. This document highlights the importance of personal values within the practice of public relations by stating the following:

> "A code of ethics and professional conduct is an individual matter that should be viewed as a guide to make [sic] sound values-based decisions. Ethical performance, not principles, is ultimately what counts. No-one can dictate precise outcomes for every situation. However, we can apply common values and decision-making processes to arrive at a decision and justify it to others" (Harrison & Galloway, 2005:3).

Mourkogiannis (2014) also emphasises the importance of a having a strong moral code to guide public relations practice. A moral code is a means of distinguishing conduct that is acceptable, versus conduct that is not acceptable. In practice, morality refers to the standards of good behaviour and differs from ethics, which merely refer to the guidelines of day-to-day behaviour. As different people have different standards of morality there is no single standard of morality. However, Mourkogiannis (2014) argues that there are standards of morality that are more effective than others, specifically as sources of understanding your purpose. A successful purpose demonstrates a deeply felt awareness of yourself, your circumstances and your potential calling (Mourkogiannis, 2014).

> It refers to your "moral DNA and is everything you believe without having to think. It also calls upon your emotional self-knowledge and intellectual capacity-hence it calls upon everything you are, everything that you have experienced and everything you believe. It is the answer you give when you're asked for the right – as opposed to the factually correct, answer" (Mourkogiannis, 2014:18).

2. *CHANGED PR PARADIGMS NEED A CHANGE IN PRPS ROLES AND PRACTICE*

Public relations paradigms have evolved from a strictly organisational and managerial view to an emergent, reflective, and multi-paradigmatic approach (Edwards, 2012). This has resulted in a critical stance towards the discipline that has extended to questioning the assumptions underlying traditional public relations practice. Scholars such as Holtzhausen and Voto (2002), and Holtzhausen (2012; 2015) postulate a theoretical shift away from a single excellent and prescriptive behavioural managerial model toward an emergent, activist stance that actively questions and resists existing power structures and normative practices.

Within a critical, socio-cultural turn, the PR research agenda has shifted away from a predominately organisational focus to include the individual practitioner, and their symbolic power relationships. This has resulted in critical interrogation of issues such as dissent, power and activism in professional role enactment. Along with these shifts in thinking, the roles of PRPs

have transformed from primarily being information disseminators toward becoming meaning makers and sense givers. In addition, a concern with organisational interests has given way to a concern for the active engagement of all stakeholders, particularly those that are deemed to be marginalised or excluded. Increasingly, PRPs are required to act as cultural intermediaries (bridges or agents) who focus on building relationships, and promote open dialogue (Hodges, 2006). This requires that PRPs do not only take their own experiences, personal preferences and knowledge into account, but also associate strongly with the views, knowledge, and sentiments of those they are engaging (Hodges, 2011). Social capital is facilitated by the ability of a PRP to establish engagement opportunities, make sense of their social interactions, understand others in their relational context, and build relationships that are equitable and fair. Social capital is deemed to be as valuable as other forms of capital (Hodges, 2011).

Table 1: Comparison of functional and critical cultural PRP roles

Functional view of PRP functions	Cultural intermediary, postmodern view of PRP functions
Organisation-centric focus with their primary role to represent organisational goals and objectives in communities (Grunig, 2009).	Performing a social role acting as agent or 'bridge' between organisation and society, seen as a "shaper of culture" (Hodges, 2006:84).
Focus on the effective distribution of information in order to influence stakeholders to support organisations and their business development objectives.	Actively involved in mediated actions (Hodges, 2011), which include cultural factors such as communication, and relationship building based on a service-orientated ethic.
Professionalisation through general, standardisation PR practices throughout the globe.	New understanding of 'mediated' communication by applying interpretative and ethnographic approaches.
Standardised messages distributed in a two-way symmetrical manner.	Contextual reality and meaning making are used in sense making activities (Hodges, 2006).
Predetermined and categorised stakeholder engagement according to the influence these stakeholders may or may not have on the future of the organisation.	Reconfiguration of social relations through emerging forms of mediation (Hodges, 2011).
Dominant coalition determines who has access to information. Strategic function of PRPs requires them to be part of dominant coalition (Steyn, 2009).	Equal access to information, communication and exercising of rights and promotional efforts are PR functions available to all and used by organisations and civil society alike.
Traditional research methodology regarded as the only trustworthy and credible forms of data gathering.	Storytelling as an emerging form of mediation and research within a socio-cultural perspective (Elmer, 2011).

Hodges (2006: 82) argues that the value and influence of public relations should be studied against the background of the "duality between public relations and culture." This introduces a critical approach to researching PRPs roles which questions the normative view of PR practice that aims to standardise PR practices according to "best practice" rules, and thereby fails to acknowledge the influence of individual PRPs on culture and practice in their own contexts.

PRPs, as cultural intermediaries, is an occupation where entry into the profession is often based on social networks, shared values, and personal experiences, rather than on) professional recognition or accreditation. Hodges (2006:85) links the cultural intermediary role of PRPs to that of PRP culture which she defines as "consisting of the life worlds of PRPs, influenced by their own cognitive processes of thoughts and values, previous experiences, knowledge as well as the effects of "occupational socialisation", which consists of a system of occupational practices focusing on making a difference in society. Hodges (2006: 88), however, observes that culture and its influence will be understood differently if it isn't approached as "something under the surface which is learned by members of a group/culture" but rather as "the life worlds of practitioners, not limited to homogenous values, beliefs and meanings of reality, but that it includes differences in reality itself." This approach acknowledges the components relevant to the occupational structure as consisting of the rules, knowledge, and socialisation appropriate to the occupation. It further acknowledges the influence of societal factors on the occupational structure and ultimately the PRP culture, as consisting of socio-cultural influences, economical, political and legal structures as well as the historical context (Hodges, 2006). This approach to PR practice is also evident in a recent view articulated by McKie and Willis (2015) in which they argue for a broader, multi-disciplinary research agenda that can guide PR education in terms of knowing, being, and doing. Within a tripartite approach, 'knowing' refers to the cognitive development of leaders about leadership; the 'doing' deals with the behavioural aspects of leading; and, 'being' refers to leaders' identity, their values and human characteristics (McKie & Willis, 2015). In the following section this approach is further explored within the context of rethinking PR education.

3. RETHINKING PR EDUCATION

Boyd and Van Slette (2009: 329) argue that although it is hard to conceptualise public relations without its modernist "assessments, accountabilities and answers," a postmodern lens (interest in issues of "power and resistance, suspicious of surface meanings" and willingness "to make judgments" outside of normative guidelines), may be better situated to guide cultural style public relations practices. De Araugo and Beal (2013: 358) suggest that exercising sound moral judgment in situations of self-imposed moral dilemmas require an "integrated moral/ethical stance based on experience, expertise, a highly developed awareness of social demands, and an apparently over-arching comprehension of the balance between personal, company, social and client needs." What is required from public relations and communication professionals is the ability to transcend their own paradigmatic assumptions, and develop multi-paradigmatic approaches to tensions that emerge in the context of communication practice.

Holtzhausen (2015) suggests that the postmodern perspective on morality places the burden of ethical decision-making solely on the individual professional that must question and resist existing power structures and decision-making practices. The practice of public relations and communication has a long history in which partisan values have dominated, resulting from the notion of agency which called on practitioners to symbolically (re)present their clients (self)-interests. Consequently, the profession has struggled with both moral and ethical issues underpinning the profession, specifically with regard to the nature of practitioner's moral reasoning

and the legitimacy of decision-making. It is therefore proposed that while the practitioner may hold intersubjective assumptions, conditioned by a community of practice, the practitioner should also take a poly-contextual view which includes other perspectives. While there are an array of approaches that theorists, researchers, and consultants involved in the management of public relations can use, the majority of these are single paradigm approaches which do not provide for alternative ways of viewing and making sense of complex realities, because they are based on the same sets of assumptions. This may affect the understanding the practitioner holds of significant aspects of the problem situation and context, especially of those aspects which would present themselves only from within alternative paradigmatic viewpoints. In this regard, Johns (2006: 87) suggests that "moral philosophy is a tool of the mind implemented by education and enhanced by experience." The importance of questioning the values, background assumptions, and normative orientations shaping research is increasingly acknowledged, particularly in the context of trans-disciplinary research, which aims to integrate knowledge from various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge (Popa, Guillermin, & Dedeurwaerdere, 2015: 45).

Edwards (2005: 269-288) suggests that rapid contextual changes in the context of practice require consideration of the nature of exchange relations between social agents in terms of:

- their consciousness, behaviour, cultural and social dimensions;
- their respective developmental stages, lines and dynamics;
- the learning processes and environments involved in the interaction;
- the multiple personal and group perspectives that can be relevant to the interaction; and
- the nature of the artefacts/communications mediating the interaction.

These shifts require a move away from a content driven approach to PR education, which is built on historic continuity and a strong culture of practice, towards rethinking the theories and approaches that underlie the framing of existing PR curriculums. Popa et al. (2015: 54) contend that by emphasising the role of "collaborative deliberation and practical knowledge generated through processes of social innovation and experimentation, pragmatism challenges the tendency to frame scientific reliability, social relevance and social legitimacy as distinct requirements on knowledge, to be traded off against one another." Such an approach is desperately needed to address the call for a decolonisation of curricula following the #feesmustfall protests of 2015-2016. Decolonisation requires South African scholars to extend their research agendas, especially in respect of social change and innovation also through more visible and active participation in transdisciplinary teams and projects that work in collaboration with the communities that are involved. Decolonisation also requires industry participation in generating practical knowledge through the documentation of non- formal sources of knowledge such as relevant case studies that can help facilitate a values-based approach to educating future professionals.

Garuba (2015) argues that in addition to assigning value, a curriculum also determines the academic formation of a new generation of practitioners through contrapuntal pedagogy that brings the knowledge of the marginalised to bear on our teaching and practice. Contrapuntal pedagogy, (a term coined by the renowned African scholar, Said, in relation to music), aims to

provide alternatives: alternative sources, alternative readings, alternative voices, and alternative presentations of evidence (Mortimer, 2005). Such an approach will foster the development of future practitioners whose morality is based on their own beliefs and values and decision-making skills, and will provide a departure from historic PR curriculums which have been focused on instilling specific values in them (Barman, 1980). Own intrinsic values developed during their formal studies and through experience obtained through experiential programmes will assist young professionals to navigate various cultural contexts in the future. The involvement of students in community engagement programmes does not only allow for these experiential opportunities, but also speaks to the decolonisation of curricula in so far as it develops contextual knowledge. It is against this background that an argument is made for values based approach to future PR education. Instead of adopting an additive approach that merely extends existing curricula, this approach adopts values as the basis for determining that which is deemed important and valuable, and that which isn't. This process may also include recognising cultural and scientific knowledge of previously devalued groups of people. Wang (2014) argues that recent critique of Euro–American centrism in communication theories has underscored the urgency to re-examine the way cultural differences are valued in academic discourse. A trans-disciplinary orientation in knowledge production, education, and institutions aims to overcome the disconnect between knowledge production and its contribution to society. Thereby complex problems that defy solution can become occasions for creating new forms of knowledge and social action through broad based involvement in knowledge generation and dissemination. The values-based approach to education offers a possible solution and a fresh approach to formulating a PR curriculum which speaks to these challenges.

4. VALUES-BASED APPROACH TO PR EDUCATION

It is evident that going forward, South African public relations and communication practitioners will be required to embrace and expand their boundary spanning roles. This will enable collaboration between variously situated participants from a variety of disciplinary and social, and institutional contexts, and to embrace mechanisms of stakeholder participation which will transform values, practices and institutions through experimentation, social innovation and collaborative learning (Verwey, 2015). It is also evident that current disciplinary boundary-setting practices, and paradigmatic fixation – along with outcomes based pedagogical approaches to PR education in South Africa – do not adequately prepare future practitioners for the possibilities and social consequences of PR practice. They also do not enable sufficient reflection and understanding of the contradictions, ambiguities, undercurrents and inequities of the post–apartheid laboratory spaces in which they will have to enact their roles as cultural intermediaries. Mizzo, Rocco and Shore (2016) argue that such 'polyphony' of perspectives fosters an understanding of the complex (often racialised) intertwining of a past, present and future relations of knowing and being. These authors argue that emergent knowing stems from the places people hold, and from where they create meaning and make collective knowledge which is often subjugated and marginalised, and removed in favour of the privileged and recorded official 'knowers.' This also relates to the earlier mentioned argument of McKie and Willis (2015) and their call for a tripartite approach of 'knowing, being and doing'. It is thus essential that pedagogical approaches to PR

education is reconceptualised to include collaborative knowledge creation, and that educators rethink their roles as cognitive authorities in the knowledge creation and dissemination process. This rethink also extends to the antagonistic relationship that seems to exist between academics and practitioners, and a tendency within the profession to value practitioner knowledge more than formal academic knowledge (Holtzhausen, 2015).

Scholars such as Ruf (2005) argue that in order to live a moral and ethical life the practitioner needs to take personal moral responsibility for their life by resisting conformity and normalizing practices. Values-based approaches therefore recognise that professionals need to develop a knowledge and awareness of values, and the abilities to reason and work with values (Woodbridge & Fulford, 2004). Values-based practice is an approach that has its roots in mental health practice, but which resonates strongly with many of the challenges of professional PR practices (McLean, 2011). It is an approach which recognises that the practitioners' personal values, and the values of others that they relate with while enacting their roles, are inextricably linked in guiding knowledge creation, practice and decision-making (Woodbridge & Fulford, 2004). A Values-Based Educational (VBE) model acknowledges that personal ethics is at the core of professional practice, and it regards the curriculum as a form of "moral education" (Sellman, 2009). It requires self-awareness and efficacy in recognising and responding to the values of others. As such, the commitment to act in accordance with these values is ultimately a matter of personal integrity.

McLean (2011) notes that within a values-based approach, learners are at all times required to be aware of their own values and behaviour; to be mindful of the professional values they personally wish to embody; and to consider how they are relating and responding to others in a morally responsible manner. Within Values-Based Education models elements of reflection, ethical responsiveness, learning to learn and higher order academic skills are seen as synergistically entwined, rather than as separate activities or 'stages' (McLean, 2011). This approach stands in stark contrast to current outcome based approaches to PR education that aim to instil the knowledge, competence, and qualities that are required when exiting the educational system, and where curriculum design starts at the point where the exit outcomes are expected to happen. As such, it represents a pedagogic shift away from instilling preferred professional PR values in learners towards a values-based and purpose-led practice. Moral accountability becomes a habit of the mind that extends learners the ability to reason and work with a 'polyphony' of values and value systems, and in accordance with their own view of the practitioner they wish to be.

The proposed VBE model reflects an explicit conceptualisation of the future nature of professional PR education which may be of broader relevance, and which may aid both learners and educators in navigating the complexities of emergent PR knowledge, cultural contexts, and practice. Its relevance for emergent practice is situated in its focus on learning to learn which fosters the practitioners ability to make judgments outside of normative guidelines, while also promoting heterogeneous learning approaches that take account of the highly individual and fragmented, poly-contextual nature of postmodern public relations practice. As such, it may be a more appropriate pedagogy for preparing future practitioners for their role as cultural intermediaries in situated and cultural style public relations.

"Rather than seeing ourselves as standing outside the groups we come to work with, we need to see ourselves as participants in collective action in which our identities, the meaning of our work, and the meaning of the entities in which we participate, emerge. In this way we can rethink what it means to do our work responsibly. As cognitive authorities in meaning making institutions we have a vital role in addressing the marginalisation of indigenous knowing and being in the day-to-day actions in which we participate" (Mizzi et al., 2016: 157).

CONCLUSION

This paper explored and conceptualised the need to rethink and revise the current approaches to PR education in response to the poly-contextual and dynamic environment of PR practice. In particular it has been argued that educating PRPs for the future requires:

1. A move away from a content driven approach to PR education, which is built on historic continuity and a strong culture of practice, towards rethinking the theories and approaches that underlie the framing of existing PR curriculums. This includes valuing of various perspectives, also those recognising cultural and scientific knowledge of previously devalued groups of people;
2. The importance of questioning the values, background assumptions, and normative orientations shaping public relations research;
3. Placing greater emphasis on collaborative deliberation and generating practical knowledge through processes of social innovation and engagement;
4. More of an emphasis on integrating knowledge from various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge;
5. A pedagogic shift away from instilling preferred professional PR values in learners towards a values-based and purpose-led practice, where moral accountability becomes a habit of the mind;
6. Reconceptualising pedagogical approaches to PR education to include collaborative knowledge creation and promoting heterogeneous learning approaches; and
7. Educators rethinking their roles as cognitive authorities in the knowledge creation and dissemination process.

PRPs are responsible for facilitating the sense and meaning making activities between diverse groups, also ensuring that those previously relegated to the margins as groups of "others" are given share of voice to state their views and collaborate in creating new knowledge. The values-based educational model provides an opportunity to equip PRPs with the confidence and personal knowledge required to act ethically in challenging contexts, practicing their knowing, being, and doing in ways that are appropriate to the context and the project. The proposed VBE model reflects an explicit conceptualisation of the future nature of professional PR education that may be of broader relevance, and may aid both learners and educators in navigating the complexities of emergent PR knowledge, cultural contexts, and practice.

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