

# IN THE REAL WORLD: CREATING CLIENT-CENTRED LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR FINAL YEAR PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS

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Higher Education institutions are under pressure to provide the industry with *job ready* graduates, which require minimum training and fully understand what is required of them in the so-called *real world*. Institutions who can demonstrate that their learning outcomes reflect the skills and attributes desired by the industry, will in return be equipped with a powerful marketing advantage as their graduates are more likely to be employed (Rundle-Thiele, Bennett, & Dann, 2005).

Potential employers are crucial stakeholders in the educational process. Their collaboration in the course design is a promise frequently made to attract students, demonstrating the real-world validity of the program. In addition, this collaboration is often essential to meet accreditation requirements, such as the one set by the Public Relations Institute of Australia, requiring industry reference groups and a minimum period of time spent in the field (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2008).

According to Kerr (2005), public relations employers are particularly looking for graduates with real life and relevant work experience. In order to enrich student learning and understanding of professional public relations practice, the final year Public Relations Consultancy unit has been designed around a 'real life client', which is selected on a semester basis. This paper provides an insight into the unit design, the mix of individual and group assignments, client motivation and students' learning experiences, including an opportunity for top performers to present – or 'pitch' - their ideas and recommendations in an authentic boardroom-like situation.

## Work Integrated Learning

Although work integrated learning has become a buzzword in education circles over the past years, the concept itself it is definitely not new. The potentials and benefits of Work Integrated Learning (WIL), or Work-Based Learning (WBL) (Reeders, 2000), have been recognised since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, predominantly in Northern America and Europe (Jancauskas et al., 1999). However, as Australian universities find themselves under growing pressure to produce *job ready* graduates, WIL is now being recognised as integral to the curriculum (Green, Quin, & Luca, 2005).

Employability upon graduation is now a critical factor in students' decisions regarding where to study (Green et al., 2005). Universities have been facing increasing demand by the industry, parents, students, governments and regulatory bodies to produce students with generic, versatile workplace skills, in addition to the more traditional discipline specific skills (Bates, 2004; Green et al., 2005; Kerr, 2005). Research indicates, Generation Y workers will change their jobs between 8-12 times during their working life, including 3-4 complete career changes (Khare, 2007). Additionally, the fast changing nature of jobs and ever faster improving technology means many of today's students may work in jobs that do not yet exist (Jukes & McCain, 2001). As a result, discipline knowledge alone is no longer a guarantee for relevant employment, as it dates quickly upon graduation. Rundle-Thiele, Bennett, & Dann (2005) argue that there needs to be a change in focus for pedagogy; away from

demonstration of knowledge, to acquisition of (lifelong) skills. Work integrated learning is popular with students and strongly supported by industry and governments (Reeders, 2000). Although the idea might not be popular with all academics, curricular design needs to meet practitioners' needs. In order to prosper in the competitive education market, higher education institutions need to offer a balanced portfolio of hard and soft skills (Coll, Taylor, & Nathan, 2003; Orrell, 2004). As a result, close industry relationships, the promise of real world validity of the course design and consequent employability of graduates are now being used as a marketing tool by most universities in their efforts to attract parents' attention and ultimately to recruit students (Kerr, 2005).

Amongst others, WIL includes guest lectures, industry speakers, field trips, real life case studies, as well as practica or placements, which all provide opportunities for tertiary institutions to produce well-rounded graduates, possessing knowledge of workplace culture and values, alongside the traditional technical competencies (Coll et al., 2003; Jancauskas et al., 1999). The focus of this paper is on integrating client-centred learning experiences as essential part of the curriculum, thereby providing students with an opportunity to apply their skills in a *real life* setting, gain relevant experience for their curriculum vitae as well as their portfolio and to demonstrate to the industry the applicability and relevance of higher education training.

Jancauskas et al. (1999) argue that WIL allows students to appreciate the importance of generic skills such as team work and communication, which have traditionally been perceived as peripheral or *soft*. Similarly, Crebert et al.'s (2004) study of graduate's perception of generic skills acquired at university and importance of work placements for future careers found that retrospectively over half of respondents felt that the development of generic skills and abilities were more important than actual content knowledge. 98% of respondent recognised the importance of ongoing generic skills development in the workplace, in order to advance in their chosen careers.

### **Creating a client centered learning experience**

According to Kerr (2005), public relations employers are particularly looking for graduates with real life and relevant work experience. In order to enrich student learning and understanding of professional public relations practice, the final year Public Relations Consultancy unit has been designed around a 'real life client', which is selected on a semester basis. This paper provides an insight into the unit design, the mix of individual and group assignments, client motivation and students' learning experiences, including an opportunity for top performers to present – or 'pitch' - their ideas and recommendations in an authentic boardroom-like situation.

As early as in 1976, Mintzberg suggested for educators to make greater use of experimental and creative skill-development techniques, which allow students to now only practice their interpersonal, but also informational and decisional management skills (Mintzberg, 1976). Mintzberg was calling for a balance between analytical and intuitive skills, recognising the value of both right and left brain thinking and thereby ultimately improving students' career opportunities. Kennedy et al. (2001) argue that to date business education is still struggling to fully embrace more approaches to teaching, thereby ignoring the diverse learning styles of today's increasingly varied student population. Educational philosophy currently promotes the concepts of lifelong and the evaluation of outputs/outcomes, rather than inputs (Green et al., 2005). We have moved from teacher to student-centred education (Kennedy et al., 2001), with an increasing emphasis in active learners as engaged participants in the education process (Burns, 2002). Higher education institutions embrace the opportunities offered at varying levels. In public relations and marketing education there has been a move towards the inclusion of real life clients and case studies in the curriculum, with some universities going as far as to create faculty based consultancies and businesses, that provide students with an opportunity to gain meaningful real life experience while studying. One of the industry leaders is Leeds Metropolitan's Centre for Public

Relations studies, which has integrated a real life communications consultancy, which successfully pitches against well established agencies in the region (Leeds Metropolitan University).

### **PR300 Consultancy**

This article focuses on the use of real life clients as part of the final year, classroom based PR Capstone unit at Curtin University of Technology. The unit is taught as part of the PR Major, based within the School of Marketing at Curtin's Business Faculty. PR300 Consultancy is a strategic communications unit, focusing on topics such as sponsorship, event management, monitoring and evaluation, time and project management, ethics and professionalism, as well as consultancy management. Also included are client services, negotiation, mediation and selling skills in the context of pitch letters and client presentations. The key distinguishing feature of Public Relations (Consultancy) 300 is the involvement of a real life client as an integral component of the unit. Unlike some earlier public relations units, PR300 requires students to produce real solutions to real problems. Consequently, very high standards of professionalism are expected. The focus of the unit is on the contribution consultants make to the overall strategic objectives of their clients, therefore, PR300 builds on knowledge gained in earlier, more technically-focused PR units but is pitched at a higher level.

Experimental learning is often limited to case studies, which – unlike in the real world – provide students with pre-assembled facts and often implied alternative courses of action (Kennedy et al., 2001). However, Mintzberg (1976) argued that “effective managers seem to revel in ambiguity; in complex, mysterious systems with relatively little order”.(p. 53). Consequently PR 300 is moving away from the safety provided in earlier units and requires students to work as independent teams on a real life scenario, with the option for top performers to *pitch* their ideas to the semester's real life client in a board room situation. Students' feedback has been relatively mixed. Some students struggle with the interactive format, while the majority gets to love it by the end of the semester, revelling in the competition and increasing the overall quality of work produced:

*“It [the unit] provides students with the opportunity to experience what the PR world is all about. It is hard work and we may not like it but it helps a lot.”*

*“Allows me to learn how to involve in PR activities (in depth) and how to professionally create a PR Plan for real client. In short we get to experience how to work with REAL client.”*

(end of semester student feedback, eVALUate, December 2007)

Student feedback has confirmed, that live cases are extremely powerful learning tools, that foster critical thinking and problem solving skills (Kennedy et al., 2001), and are actively remembered and referred to by students for years to come. Traditionally, PR 300 had made use of a range of non-for profit *clients*, which had attracted some criticism from students, who were keen to compete in the for-profit world. As a result, the unit partnered up with a locally based sporting team, which had just undergone a rather large re-positioning exercise. Competing in a national league, most students may have been supporters of the local rival team, but were reasonably aware of the client, its business and its positioning.

### **Client Briefing**

Students experienced first hand that real live cases are not always straight forward. As in real life, clients might not always be forthcoming. In fact, they might not even know what they want, which was the case for semester 1 2008 PR Consultancy students. A last minute change to the briefing line up resulted in a speaker who was more interested in promoting their own club than to provide student with the information they were expecting. “Ambiguity is a vital element of dealing with any business” (Kennedy et al., 2001), and scenarios like this arguably help students to learn and solve complex and unstructured problems, however, not all students were sufficiently equipped to deal with such a high

level of ambiguity. Different learning styles and cultural backgrounds unarguably highlighted the varying levels of preparedness.

In order to guide students throughout the consultancy process, the unit teamed up with a local communications consultancy, which provided active support in terms of guest lectures from both senior and junior consultants as well as additional teaching material and feedback.

Following the briefing, students had to locate additional information, which had to be analyzed and synthesized. They were expected to evaluate the client's business environment, including their strengths and weaknesses, as well as potential opportunities and threats. As part of this a thorough competitor analysis was expected. To do so, they heavily relied on web based research, the online library, interviews, media analysis and client materials. Students also had to deal with conflicting information. The information age has provided us with a wide range of information sources, which demands high level analytical and critical thinking skills. However, some students struggle to determine which source was more reliable: Wikipedia – or the real life client?

Aware of potential group issues, but also the need for effective team skills to succeed in the industry, PR300 aims to strike a balance between individual and group assignments, all of which are based around the semester's real life client. First, students were expected to individually prepare a briefing document, based on the verbal briefing session. Next, students grouped themselves into teams of 4-5, following session on team roles based on Belbin's team (Belbin, 1996) roles. The assumption was made that at a third year level students should be in the position to form productive and well-structured teams, based on prior knowledge and experience.

Students had three deadlines, equally distributed throughout the semester. Within these guidelines, they were expected to set their own deadlines and organise regular team meetings. As the teaching team had limited knowledge of the client's situation, student had to rely on their own research and analytical skills. Lectures and tutorials were focused on the various skills needed as consultants - such as presentation and pitching skills, time and project management, stakeholder relations and strategic reports – thereby assisting students throughout the process. Around mid-semester teams were provided with an opportunity to present their ideas and suggestions back to the rest of the group in a 15 minute *client pitch*. The challenge was to balance the amount of details and creative suggestions to be given away. Students were extremely worried about the potential of other teams copying their ideas. However, they also had to be creative, innovative and informative enough to keep their audience interested. The stronger teams recognised this as an opportunity to gain further feedback and to re-fine their ideas for their final strategy report. While the rest of the class acted on behalf of the client, they used feedback and probing questions to strengthen their final recommendations.

On the basis of their mid-semester pitch, students spent the second half of the semester working on a comprehensive strategy report. Again, the unit guidelines were limited, requesting the use of a business report format and providing suggestions for the various sections to be included. However, the presentations and content of the final report were completely up to the team's understanding of their client's requirements. The top three student teams were selected for an opportunity to present their ideas and expertise to the client and the partner consultancy in a live boardroom situation, in front of industry representatives and academic staff, with the prospect of securing a highly sought after placement opportunity.

## **Discussion & challenges**

Using a live business case means students face a number of challenges, which traditionally would not occur in a safe, class room environment. PR300 provided both students and staff with a range of challenges in semester 1 2008. Students are socialised by universities to anticipate the left-brain, logical-linear-sequential presentation pedagogical style (Kennedy et al., 2001). They expect problems to be laid out and expect that instructors known and will provide them with the answers. Most students found, at least initially, the ambiguity frightening and confusing.

First of all, the brief provided by the client was rather *patchy*. A number of staff and structural changes during the course of the semester meant that the client was more interested in self-promotion, than actually using the students' expertise and insight. Unarguably, this was an advantage of using non-for profit organisations in the past, which tended to be highly appreciative of the students advice and suggestions, usually providing the opportunity for a top performer to implement at least some of their strategies during a work placement.

Time was another big issue, particularly when a key contact had to travel first interstate and then overseas, and was not able to provide students with additional material and requested details as quickly as anticipated by the teams. The idea of introducing a partner consultancy was warmly welcomed. However, again time issues and conflicting deadlines presented a challenge, with the consultancy not being able to get involved as much as initially anticipated.

The group process can be very *messy* and highly unpopular with some students. However, *team skills* are part of Curtin's nine graduate attributes, recognising the industry's need for graduates that work well as part of teams and understand group dynamics. The team process can be highly rewarding – in fact, every semester appears to have a handful of extreme examples. In order to combat any underlying issues, an end of semester peer and self evaluation has been introduced.

Using live cases and experimental learning means that staff has to be prepared to receive negative feedback in the end of semester evaluations. Not all students are happy about being pushed outside their own comfort zone. However, the stronger students recognise that live cases provide a unique opportunity to connect them with the business community. They provide students with an insight into various industries and a chance to make valuable contacts. They gain a real life insight and an opportunity to develop their portfolio as well as to add *work experience* to their Curriculum Vitae. Reportedly, students often struggle with the fact that most employers are looking for graduates with a minimum of 12-24 months experience. Real life cases and other work integrated learning opportunities provide students with highly sought after experience, whilst still at university. They avoid producing graduates that rely heavily on theory and textbooks, but have an understanding of and experience in the field.

## **Conclusion**

Live cases are definitely not a safe alternative to teacher-centred activities. They are risky. They can be extremely messy. And student can get very frustrated. They can also be very time intensive. However, is this not what working in business is truly about? Working in public relations – or in fact any business discipline – is never safe. Clients are very unlikely to provide you with all the information required. Deadlines are always an issue and working in teams very rarely goes smoothly. Despite the increased workload and demand on staff, using live cases is incredibly rewarding when you see students advance and step up to the challenge. Real life client pitches are a large risk, particularly when not all teams perform as expected, but the other top performers will most likely make up for their shortcomings. Live cases will certainly not be popular with all students, but they arguably provide a very good indicator for students of what is expected, and for staff of who is going to succeed in the *real world*.

The use of live cases can be extremely rewarding – both for students and staff. They provide not only an opportunity to build students' CVs and portfolios, they can also be a powerful marketing tool. As they provide an intensive, highly involving experience, students tend to talk about their real life clients for many years to come, thereby creating (positive) word of mouth for the unit and ultimately the course overall.

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