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Educating communication professionals: The case for ethics in the curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This commentary examines the value of teaching ethics as a part of public relations and communications management education. It centers on the premise that teaching ethics to public relations students cannot provide any degree of assurance to future employers, or society, that these individuals will actually behave in an ethical manner. The question of whether it is ethical to teach ethics to students in the professions is raised – the author muses as to whether public relations faculties would have a different view of what they teach to their students, how they teach it and who teaches it if they were held accountable for the moral decisions of their graduates.

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The 2006 report from the Commission on Public Relations Education in the United States was clear: “In today’s practice of public relations, ethical conduct is quintessential. Modern public relations is defined by ethical principles, and no public relations practice should exist in contemporary society without full commitment to ethical practice” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006, p. 21). This statement begs the question: Where do neophyte public relations practitioners learn that commitment to ethical practice? And more importantly, how do they learn it – and from whom?

Whether we like it or not, teaching ethics to public relations (PR) students, or students in any professional discipline for that matter, cannot provide any degree of assurance to future employers, or society, that these individuals will actually behave in an ethical manner. However, there is little argument that the ethical behavior of public relations and corporate communication (CC) professionals is of paramount importance, and that somewhere along their way toward

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professional socialization, professional ethics ought to be a part of their professional education.

Unfortunately, in our headlong lurch into ethics education we have failed to provide educators, many of whom have little background in either ethics or educational theory, with the guidance or resources they require both to develop and to deliver such curricular content. This is a significant omission given that most forays into ethics education in PR and CC are not in the form of stand-alone courses; rather, they are concepts that are integrated into all manner of theory and practical courses. When ethics is integrated in this way, the quality of the content and pedagogy is largely at the mercy of the vagaries of who is teaching the specific course, how much he or she knows about ethics, how important he or she believes it to be in relation to the focus of the course, and how much time is left over. This is a quality issue of ethics education that needs to be addressed.

In an analysis of the ethical implications of attempting to teach ethical behavior to students in the professions some two decades ago, Waithe and Ozar (1990) posed the following question: "Does an ethicist bear some responsibility for the conception that others form of the effects on a student of having completed a course in professional ethics? We believe so" (p. 17). Further, they rather provocatively suggest that it may be unethical to teach ethics if the public, in whose interest we teach ethical behaviour, believes that the graduates will then behave ethically. Perhaps public relations faculties would have a different view of what they teach to their students, how they teach it and who teaches it if they were held accountable for the moral decisions of their graduates.

Everyone seems to be talking about ethics these days – for good reason. The genesis of the financial meltdown of 2008 and beyond could arguably be traced to the ethical behaviour, or lack thereof, within the financial industry, thus making ethics the flavour du jour. Most professional disciplines consider professional ethics to be among the requirements for basic educational programs. Indeed, ethics has often been touted in PR's educational literature as being something that "ought" to be addressed. However, there is little consensus about what, how, when, and by whom it ought to be taught. The recent Educators' Round Circle discussion at the 2013 annual meeting of the Canadian Public Relations Society (A. Thurlow, personal communication, 2013), underscores the fact that regardless of how often we have raised the issue, it has yet to be resolved. The only consensus seems to be that ethics education *ought* to be part of the basic curriculum. It could even be reasonably argued that to neglect ethics education for neophyte public relations and corporate

communications practitioners is to contribute to the perpetuation of the image of PR as flacks and spin doctors with the moral conscience of Attila the Hun.

Almost ten years ago, I reported on a study of ethics education in public relations programs across Canada (Parsons, 2004). The results demonstrated a lack of consistency on what, how, when and by whom ethics was taught, highlighting the potential for misperceptions of the outcomes. The major conclusion was this: Professional ethics education in post-secondary public relations programs in Canada was inconsistent to say the least. At that time, only three of nine programs offered a stand-alone course, and only two of those were mandatory for graduation. A 2005 study designed to assess the outcomes of advertising and public relations graduates taking an ethics course suggests that those who have taken an ethics course are “significantly more likely to value ethics highly, to be able to identify ethical issues, and to have drawn on ethics coursework” (Gale & Bunton, 2005, p. 283) as they pursued their careers. Although small in scale, and requiring replication, this study suggests that it’s time we took a closer look at the priority of stand-alone ethics courses in our curricula.

The placement of the content/course within the curriculum was also a problem in my Canadian study: offerings ranged from students studying the topic in their very first semester to students with two-to three years of PR education, including a work placement prior to studying professional ethics. It seems that this has not changed over the past decade. Students who study professional ethics early in their education will have very different experiences and outcomes than those who study it later.

Another distressing finding was the inconsistency in the qualifications of the people teaching the course(s). The ethics backgrounds ranged from someone who had studied and written extensively about PR ethics to the most frequent response: no background in ethics whatsoever. There is a significant risk that rather than basing the teaching on a cogent examination of ethics and ethical decision-making, it may become more of an exercise in moralizing.

As PR/CC educators in Canada and beyond examine ethics education for future practitioners, they might well consider the ten mistakes that were identified by the study findings:

- 1. Failure to plan where the course ought to be placed in the curriculum.***
How much should the student be expected to understand about public relations practice before being expected to apply ethical decision-making models, for example?
- 2. Course objectives that fail to consider all three domains: knowledge,***

attitude and behaviour. For the programs that do not offer stand-alone courses, there are no specific objectives. What, then, are the students expected to learn?

3. *Failure to allow students to build on their own value systems and construct a new awareness from where they are.* There was little reporting of students being coached to examine their own value systems and to assess their own level of ethical functioning.

4. *Heavy reliance on case studies that focus on higher-level, managerial situations.* The most commonly used method of instruction reported was the use of the case study. More research needs to be done here on the kinds of cases used and how they are used. We need to ensure that the cases relate not only to managerial issues that the students will not likely face for many years. They should instead focus heavily on entry-level issues such as whether to use the office copier for personal use, or the extent to which they are willing to stretch the truth in a media release.

5. *A belief that the best guest speakers are those in high-level positions when most grads need to understand the non-managerial issues.* This reflects similar concerns as using managerial case studies. Practitioners in higher-level positions have a tendency, and this is to be expected, to focus on their current positions and the ethical dilemmas they currently face. Whereas these can be interesting and even exciting for the students, they need a better grounding in what happens on the front lines.

6. *Taking a shotgun approach to ethics.* When ethics is “integrated but not specifically themed throughout the program,” there can be a tendency for ethics education to lack focus and clear objectives.

7. *Failing to allow students time to reflect on what they are learning.* Learning about professional ethics is learning about oneself as a moral individual. Failing to allow students the opportunity to reflect on themselves and their value systems may be short-changing them.

8. *Lack of creativity in developing evaluation instruments.* Reliance on tests and case studies is a more difficult issue than many of us are willing to admit. For example, should the student who makes the more “right” decisions reflecting a high level of integrity, be given a higher mark than the student who can do better on a test about theories? It may sound attractive, but who are you to judge?

Conclusion

Professional ethics education in public relations and corporate communications in Canada is, at the present time, a moving target. There is little consistency in either what students are taught, or what kinds of outcomes can or should be expected. There is ample evidence to suggest that this situation needs to be rectified – and soon – if we are to be taken seriously as ethical professionals.

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