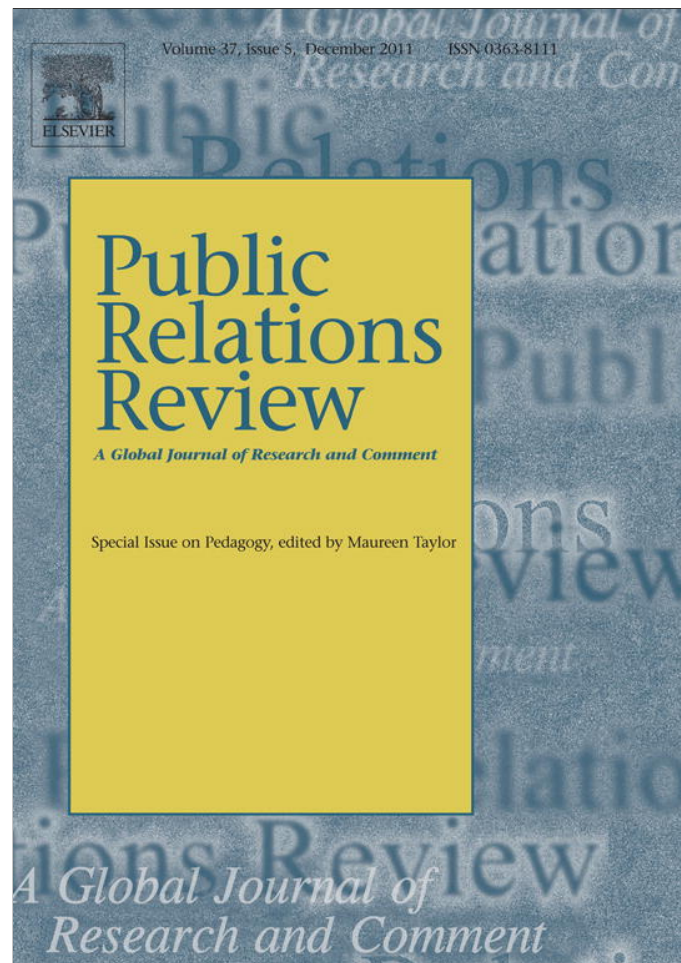


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## Public Relations Review



# The role of narrative in public relations ethics pedagogy

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## ABSTRACT

Competence in ethical decision making is one of the most important issues in the industry and practice of public relations, yet professionals entering the discipline overestimate their knowledge and skills related to ethical principles. This article features a pedagogical approach to strengthen ethics education in public relations through the use of collaborative student-professional ethics narratives. This technique attempts to move beyond a traditional case study approach and transcend traditional classroom boundaries through the development of narratives featuring real ethics situations experienced by public relations professionals. The project involved the development, implementation and assessment of the pedagogical approach that required students to interview local communication professionals (mostly in public relations) and to craft narratives that explore ethical dilemmas these professionals faced. Pre- and post-test surveys and group feedback helped explore the impact of narrative inquiry in helping students internalize ethical lessons.

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## 1. Introduction

I had the opportunity last semester to witness a spectacular teaching demonstration by a search candidate on the topic of media relations. At one point in the presentation, the candidate presented two case studies highlighting ethical dilemmas faced by public relations professionals. This caught the attention of the colleague sitting next to me as much as it did the students. My colleague, who specializes in a different discipline, leaned over and asked me: “Does anyone tell students they’ll be facing these types of situations in their future careers?” I smiled back at him, and after the teaching presentation, I shared with him an overview of our program’s communication ethics course required for our students majoring in advertising and public relations. He seemed relieved, as well as surprised, that we would require such a course.

Like many other programs that educate public relations students, we focus on the skills, knowledge and abilities required to develop students into successful public relations practitioners. Equally important to our program, however, are outcomes related to strengthening moral and civic values (Boyle, 2007; Fall, 2006) and the ability of these future practitioners to demonstrate ethical and moral conduct in both their professional and personal lives (VanSlyke Turk, 2006, p. 22).

## 2. Literature review

The need for ethics education has been well supported in scholarly research and by professional organizations that guide the discipline (Bacon’s, 2007; Moberg, 2006; VanSlyke Turk, 2006). However, research shows there remains a gap between the goal for graduates to have ethical decision-making skills and reality, and that new professionals entering the discipline overestimate their learning and understanding of ethical principles (Kim & Johnson, 2009). Finding ways to bridge this gap has

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been the focus of educators and researchers who have explored varied pedagogical practices to strengthen ethics education including student-professional mentor interaction (Place, 2008), group exercises (Kovacs, 2008), team teaching (Lingwall, 2008), guest lectures (Lingwall, 2008), experiential learning (Worley, Worley, Hugenberg, & Elkins, 2009), simulated learning (Kuhn, 1998), capstone courses (Neff, 2002; Silverman, 2007), and case studies (Laditka & Houck, 2006; Moberg, 2006; Parkinson & Ekachai, 2002; Sykes, 2008).

Context is especially important to help students integrate their previously acquired knowledge to complex problem solving (Moberg, 2006), especially problems that have ethical implications. Making ethical decisions requires wisdom gained through tacit knowledge, which “is transmitted through experience, through narrative, and through ‘deep’ social interaction” (Moberg, 2006, p. 312). Several pedagogical strategies are used to help educators achieve contextual understanding of real-world situations students will face when they become public relations practitioners. Most of these can be classified as experiential learning, which includes a broad spectrum of diverse forms of pedagogy. Kuhn (1998) advocates simulation as one effective experiential learning approach because of its ability to engage “the whole student, not just their (sic) intellect and analytic powers” (p. 305). Arousing emotion is central to help students embody the theoretical lessons learned in the classroom, and Kuhn (1998) contends simulations surpass case studies as a means to arouse emotion in learning because they are closer to representing “real life” (p. 301).

Case studies, however, still serve an important purpose in the public relations curriculum, and they are favored by educators (Lingwall, 2008). Through case studies, students are challenged to use a myriad of problem-solving approaches to analyze the case, to exercise “moral imagination in the search for innovative solutions” (Winston, 2000, p. 156), and to consider values and ethical theories that may help them resolve the ethical dilemma presented. Many of the most compelling case studies, however, feature large companies or situations that students (especially those not yet working in the field) may find difficult to envision encountering in their future careers. The case presented in the previously referenced teaching demonstration, for example, featured a prominent media relations gaffe by Walmart. Although I use such case studies in my classes, I always feel students are missing important opportunities to connect the case to real situations they will face in their future careers.

Simulations, case studies, and other forms of experiential learning fill an important role in ethics education in public relations. However, in my own experience teaching a communication ethics course and observing others who do the same, it is apparent students do not take to heart the ethical concepts they are studying. Students learn a variety of theories and approaches to ethical decision making, and they study a myriad of *real-world* cases where professionals are challenged with moral dilemmas. It seems, however, students do not embrace or embody the type of morality or social conscience we had like to see instilled within them. The related virtues do not become part of their being. To achieve that level of learning and integration, a deeper level of lived experience is required. Such living wisdom may be fostered through the type of pedagogical project featured in this article.

### 2.1. Going beyond traditional case study method

Several researchers have explored techniques to further the case study method to enhance its impact on students; that is, to strengthen students' ability to internalize moral lessons, such as by connecting ethics lessons to broadcast news events (Sykes, 2008) and by using social media and other technologies to chat with in-house or agency practitioners about cases (Kovacs, 2008).

Moberg (2006) carried case studies further by encouraging students to capture stories from practitioners they know, and Laditka and Houck (2006) assigned student-developed case studies created from students' own experience. Both of these approaches demonstrated positive learning for the students, but they involved students who were more mature than the typical undergraduate students in many baccalaureate institutions, and the case studies featured general business issues and environments. Moberg's (2006) research involved MBA students, and Laditka and Houck's (2006) research featured students in a graduate business management program whose average age was 35.2 years. Students in many public relations academic programs are young, inexperienced, not yet working in the field, and have no contacts in the local community to initiate this type of field research. For these students, other methods are needed that blend experiential learning with case studies. Little work has been done to extend this effort into undergraduate public relations education.

This project attempts to advance this cause by incorporating narrative inquiry, building on research that supports the value of stories in learning. “Stories can have a strong impact on our moral development. Stories have an ability to change us ethically by experiencing the characters and the lessons they learn” (Coles, 1989, p. 137). Through stories the writer and reader can learn concepts and understand related theories. As Bochner (1997) explains: “Theory meets story when we ‘think with’ a story rather than about it” (p. 434).

When prepping my communication ethics courses for the first time, I looked far and wide, to no avail, for texts featuring narratives that would resonate with my younger population of students. There also was limited research featuring the value and impact of such narratives in teaching communication ethics. This study furthers knowledge in this area by developing a new pedagogical approach for teaching public relations ethics, and it examines the value and effectiveness of this type of pedagogical approach in reaching young students about to confront professional ethical challenges for the first time.

### 3. Pedagogical approach

The pedagogical approach involved students and public relations professionals in co-creating ethics narratives that may be used in future classes. To provide a point of reference for research comparison, the assignment featured elements similar to work by other scholars who experimented with case study methods (Harrison, 2002; Laditka & Houck, 2006; Moberg, 2006). This project, however, delved further into attributes unique to narrative inquiry, including capturing the voices of the public relations professionals and others (Wilensky & Hansen, 2001), eliciting stories with characters and plot (Ospina & Dodge, 2005), and developing a narrative that “makes the heart as important as the mind” (Bochner, 1993, pp. 2–3)—by evoking emotion and connecting to issues of human vulnerability and moral choice (Bochner, 1993).

Through this approach, students become fully engaged in the ethical scenario (Bochner, 1997), and writing becomes a method of discovery. This contrasts the way researchers often are trained to conceptualize writing as “writing up” the research (Richardson, 2005, p. 517). Writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis for the students to learn more about themselves and to connect theory to their story (Bochner, 1997). Because this project featured writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2005), the pedagogical approach is outlined in the following section.

### 4. Method

Following is an overview of the pedagogical approach and exploratory research, including identification of the project partners (participants/subjects) and descriptions of the pedagogical approach and methods to assess project outcomes, including pre- and post-test surveys and a group feedback session.

#### 4.1. Research partners

The primary research partners for this project included 24 students, mostly senior students majoring in advertising and public relations who were enrolled in the required communication ethics course at a baccalaureate institution. Professionals from our local public relations associations, advertising associations, and other groups participated in the ethics narrative interviews. A second group of students taking the same course with a different instructor who did not assign the ethics narrative project also participated in the pre- and post-test survey to help explore similarities and differences in learning. There were many similarities among the two courses: student demographics and majors, frequency of course meetings, textbook, classroom meeting space, and other assignments. Because students had different instructors, survey results were intended only to be exploratory to guide future research and pedagogical efforts.

As previously explained, the student participants were younger and less experienced than subjects in similar experiential case study projects. Of the 24 students participating in the project, 16 were female, 8 were male, and the average age was 21.2 years. Through internships, most had some experience working in a communication field, but most had less than 1 year of experience (73.9%), and more than half had less than 1 semester of experience (56.5%). Most of the students planned to work in advertising (30.4%), public relations (26.1%), or some other mix of marketing or communication-related fields (17.3%). Career choice for 26.1% of participants was unknown due to no response for that corresponding survey question. Characteristics for the nonparticipating class of students were similar.

The first semester the pedagogical approach was administered, 23 communication professionals participated, representing a broad mix of jobs from entry-level practitioner through CEO in a diverse range of industries including agencies, corporations, government institutions, nonprofits, and media outlets. An important part of the success of the project was guaranteeing confidentiality for the participating professionals. In all narratives written by students, pseudonyms were used to identify the professionals, coworkers, companies, and in some cases, even cities and states.

#### 4.2. Pedagogical approach

The pedagogical approach was incorporated into the communication ethics courses, and students were required (for a graded assignment) to develop an ethics narrative featuring a real situation experienced by their chosen professional. The assignment required students to meet with and interview a local professional and to craft a short narrative (5–8 pages) that explored several factors related to the ethical circumstance. As part of writing a narrative that might later be shared in study findings or publications, students became co-researchers and engaged in Institutional Review Board procedures. They carried out required protocols for protecting human subjects by explaining research procedures to the professionals whom they interviewed and by securing informed consent forms. Students audio recorded their interviews, whenever research participants consented.

Student interviews with the professionals covered a range of topics—everything to help students understand that ethical decision making exists in every industry and is woven through all stages of one's career. Topics included: working with an unethical client; negotiating with clients who want you (a PR company account executive) to hide bad news from the press; addressing challenges with social media (negative online word-of-mouth); making decisions about whether to share negative information with the media; handling negative front-page news about your own company; controlling media and investigative reporters; tolerating difficult coworkers; partnering in an account team that overpromises what your company

can do; not getting credit for your work; writing and publishing stories with ethical implications; producing shows with unethical overtones; adjusting to a new job; terminating employees; whistleblowing; losing your job; and dealing with employees, vendors and clients who embezzled and even laundered money in ways that directly impacted your company.

Through the narratives, students relived the ethical situations faced by professionals, true to principles of narrative inquiry. Stories were written in a mix of third-person and first-person voice, as if they were “written from inside experience” (Bochner, 1993, p. 2). Their narratives were compelling, heart-felt accounts of lived experiences of the professionals that helped students “see and feel the phenomena in question” (Freeman, 1998, p. 465). Narratives demonstrated the students’ ability to empathize with the struggles of others and to evoke emotions for readers through lessons “about human vulnerability, moral choice and suffering” (Bochner, 1993, pp. 2–3). As demonstrated in the pre- and post-test surveys and narrative feedback session, students became fully engaged in ways I had hoped—connecting ethical theory to the real-world situations they were able to live through their narratives.

#### 4.3. Pre- and post-test surveys

Pre- and post-test surveys were administered to help identify key outcomes of the ethics narrative assignment. As previously mentioned, for general comparison, surveys were given to a second class that did not participate in the ethics narrative assignment. A debriefing session also was held with students and professionals, where participants discussed their perception of the pedagogical project.

### 5. Results

Presented here are perceptions of the ethics narrative assignment from students and professionals who participated in the ethics interviews. This is followed by sample outcomes exploring students’ change in knowledge of ethical concepts and in their personal and professional values. Several questions on the post-test survey (for the participating group) asked students specifically to evaluate the ethics narrative assignment, including the following questions (with results shown):

*Completing the ethics narrative assignment helped me reflect on an important ethical situation:* 69.6% strongly agree; 30.4% agree.

*Completing the ethics narrative assignment helped me better understand the types of ethical situations I may face in the workplace:* 73.9% strongly agree; 26.1% agree.

*Completing the ethics narrative assignment helped me feel better prepared to deal with ethical situations I may face in the workplace:* 73.9% strongly agree; 21.8% agree; 4.3% strongly disagree.

Students also rated on a scale of 1–10 how helpful they found various course elements. The ethics narrative assignment rated 9.5 compared to an average rating of 8.6 for all other course elements such as course lectures, Blog, class exercises, quizzes, and other assignments. Students also shared comments that specifically addressed the ethics narrative:

“The main advantage was hearing first-hand from a professional what ethical dilemmas they faced”.

“Understanding that everyone has ethical issues and that doing what you feel is ethically right can pay off”.

“Being able to speak with a professional and learning about all the little ethical situations that occur was really eye-opening”.

“The Ethics Narrative. . .really [gave] you a bird’s eye view into real ethical situations and how other professionals chose to handle them”.

“Being able to write the Ethics Narrative in first-person was awesome and delightfully unique from the other papers I had to write”.

“When I come to a crossroads of whether I should/shouldn’t do something, I’ll probably think of this situation”.

“It helped put things in perspective and allowed me to realize how I would deal with different ethical issues”.

“I will for sure follow the advice my person gave me, because he follows a lot of good ethics, and he has succeeded because of good choices he makes”.

#### 5.1. Professionals’ feedback

The public relations and other communication professionals who participated in the ethics interviews were invited to participate in a debriefing luncheon at the end of the semester, and several provided feedback by email. This luncheon provided an opportunity for students to continue networking and learning through informal conversation with professionals. Feedback about the project was overwhelmingly positive, with most comments focused on the reciprocal benefit the professionals gleaned through their participation. Following is a sampling of comments from professionals:

“It was great talking with an aspiring professional, and I think it was a great opportunity, as a professional, to step back and remember what it was like to be a recent grad and some of the fears you had”.

“It was really good for me to look back over my career—when we’re faced with ethical situations on a day-to-day basis—to think back about why we made those decisions, and that’s really important”.

“It was good from a mentoring perspective to say, ‘You know, here’s what I did, and this is what worked for me’”.

In addition to self-reflection about their participation in the project, professionals offered advice and encouragement to students about dealing with ethical challenges and maintaining personal virtues:

“Credibility and reputation: Know that you can create your own reputation and build your own credibility based on the decisions you make”.

“Work for a company you believe in and do something you believe in. If you’re doing what you’re passionate about, the ethical issues will work themselves out”.

“If you stay in this industry, you’re going to find you’re part of a small town, pretty much. You might be able to make a bad ethical decision today that will make you more dollars today, but it’s going to be a bad decision down the road”.

“If you’re ever in a position where you’re being asked to cross the line, that’s a good time to start looking elsewhere”.

“Pick your battles; especially when you’re younger. If it’s something you don’t necessarily like, but it’s not unethical, you just have to say, ‘Well it’s the boss’s decision,’ and you go with it. But if it starts hitting that black-and-white, right-and-wrong line, and you feel like you’re being pulled over to the dark side, then get that resume shined up. It’s time to go look somewhere else, because the first time they push you over that line might be the last”.

In addition to qualitative feedback about the pedagogical approach, surveys were used to assess student learning related to ethical concepts and decision making and changes in related beliefs and values.

## 5.2. Assessment of student learning of ethical concepts

The strongest survey outcomes pertained to changes in learning among students who participated in the ethics narrative assignment regarding the general importance of being ethical in work and public relations practice, and understanding ethical implications of giving gifts to moral claimants such as clients, politicians and the media. Across the board, students who participated demonstrated greater learning on related concepts than nonparticipating students. However, there were two areas where students who participated in the ethics narrative assignment not only did more poorly than nonparticipating students but reversed their level of understanding and conviction by the end of the project: understanding the *distinction between ethical and legal permissions*, and understanding of *the importance of pro-bono/advocacy work* in the industry. Among the participant group, 28.6% of students believed more strongly by the end of the project that any legally sanctioned actions would be justifiable, regardless of ethical concerns. Results were even more surprising for the pro-bono/advocacy question that produced the only upside-down outcome—more negative learning than positive learning.

The survey question regarding pro-bono/advocacy work asked students to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with the following statement: *Communication practitioners have a professional responsibility to undertake advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged and voiceless groups in the community without expectation of payment*. Overall, 30.4% disagreed with this statement, and 30.0%, regardless of their level of agreement, believed less strongly in this statement by the end of the project than they did at the beginning, leaving this the most poorly rated learning outcome among the participating group of students. In comparison, among students who did not participate in the ethics narrative project, only 15.0% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, and 18.8% believed less strongly in the statement by the end of the semester. This outcome for the participating group was disconcerting considering one of the desired goals of the project was for students to internalize ethical lessons and to take to heart the ethical concepts they were studying. This caused me to question reasons for the possible reversal in student knowledge and beliefs, as discussed in the next section.

## 6. Discussion

Although the survey was not intended to provide definitive proof of the success or failure of this project, it did provide insight into student learning and students’ perceptions of the ethics narrative project. With any such survey, it is difficult to discern whether the results were impacted by the actual phenomenon being studied or by any number of other factors such as the instructor, colleagues in the class, other portions of class curriculum, or other personal factors. Nonetheless, survey outcomes, narrative comments from students and professionals, and the ethics narratives themselves, reflected a pedagogical approach that was greatly appreciated by students and professionals and which demonstrated some significant outcomes for improved learning about key ethical concepts related to public relations practice. However, outcomes also pointed to some deficiencies that warrant further examination, for example, students’ perceptions of the importance of *undertaking advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged and voiceless groups*.

I considered the possibility that something about me or my teaching style might have contributed to negative outcomes in this area. Having worked 20 years in nonprofit organizations and social justice causes, I tend to ooze advocacy, even when I’m trying not to. I was concerned my advocate persona may have seeped into my classroom and fatigued students. Upon further exploration, however, I found similar outcomes in other research that featured the impact of an ethics education

project. Research conducted by Harrison (2002) also produced negative results in post-test surveys (after administering the ethics module) in participants' support of "the imperative of pro-bono work". This motivates me to look further into possible causes for this outcome and to seek opportunities to have a positive impact on this outcome in future iterations of this project. I also will explore other methods that can be incorporated into the communication ethics course or elsewhere in the students' curriculum.

## 7. Conclusion

This research explored the value of student-developed ethics narratives as an effective approach to engage students in thinking about and resolving ethical issues experienced in public relations practice. This involved enacting the proposed pedagogical approach in the classroom by means of connecting students with local public relations professionals to develop ethics narratives that can be published and/or used in future teaching. The project involved multiple stages of working with students and professionals to execute the pedagogical approach, along with pre- and post-test surveys to help assess its impact on students. Such projects can provide a rich opportunity for students to interact with community professionals and explore through narrative inquiry the types of ethical challenges that await them in their future careers. As educators, we can and should do more to increase students' awareness and understanding of ethical dilemmas they will encounter, as well as to foster their personal and moral development to become contributing members of our profession.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.09.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.09.022).

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