Teaching Note

CONNECTING THEORY TO PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY SHOWING HOW THESE MATERIALS WERE USED BY A POSTGRADUATE LECTURER IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION

Background

I ran this session in May 2014 with two different groups of students who were undertaking the first year of a Master of Communication by coursework. Both groups were working on their final assignments and were in week 9 of a 12 week unit of study. The first group was enrolled in a unit on public relations theory and practice, whilst the other was working on their final assessment for a unit on organisational communication. I had run the complementary Session Writing a summary and synopsis (from this project’s resources) with each group in advance, so the students were equipped to distil a key idea from an article. Both groups were small and comprised students from a range of cultural, linguistic, educational and social backgrounds.

The Master of Communication at my university is popular with domestic students wanting to enhance their established careers in the fields of communication, media and public relations (or make a career shift into this area), as well as a younger cohort from arts, business and other undergraduate degrees (both international and domestic) wanting to enter these fields with the advantage of a postgraduate degree. Many of the older students had been away from study for years, and lacked confidence in their academic writing, whilst many of the younger students lacked experience in expressing their ideas. International students in both groups came from different parts of Asia and South America and it was always important for me as a lecturer to consider the cultural dimensions in their learning process, as well as the challenges those students faced in thinking, speaking and writing in English in a postgraduate classroom.
The core units of study introduce students to a body of literature on theoretical principles, concepts and frameworks, then expose them to a number of practical examples in professional practice through guest lectures and case studies, and finally require them to conduct a spoken and written analysis of current or recent practice, which integrates theory and practice. The material in this Session on **Connecting theory to practice** was particularly attractive to me because I hoped it would help both groups of students to connect concepts and ideas to the contemporary cases they were analysing in their final unit assignments.

My public relations students were required to relate ideas from their coursework reading about campaign evaluation to their discussion and analysis of a recent high profile public relations campaign. This was the unit’s assignment topic:

**Evaluate a contemporary public relations campaign or activity with reference to the literature on campaign measurement and evaluation.**

Their brief was to write a report for the board of the organisation, outlining the campaign background, objectives and strategies, presenting available data on media coverage and other outputs or outcomes of the campaign, reflecting on the limitations of the available data, and advising the board on which methods, approaches and tools would enhance the capacity to measure and evaluate the campaign.

My organisational communication students were required to apply principles and concepts from their reading on effective organisational communication to a recent high profile case of organisational change or transformation. This was the unit’s assignment topic:

**Discuss a recent case of major organisational change in which communication to internal and external audiences was required. Analyse the communication approach adopted by the organisation, with reference to the set literature in this unit.**

Many students did not appear to have effective ways of organising key ideas from the readings. Many were struggling (for different reasons) to write about the links between their readings and the material they were analysing about recent and contemporary cases.

**What I did**

In order to allow students to focus on building their skills, I co-taught this session with a lecturer from the Academic Skills Unit at our university.
Activity 1: Filling in an ideas sheet

We utilised materials from my units of study and focussed specifically on the assignments they were working on in class. We wanted to use examples and language reflecting their everyday lives and so we introduced the session with lots of examples about how students were already experienced at using ideas from different sources to reflect on a situation or a problem in order to form opinions and draw conclusions. We talked about how we read movie reviews, online travel blogs, Facebook stories and news articles to draw conclusions and how we usually seek evidence from a variety of sources to help us make decisions. We emphasised that academic sources can help us to draw conclusions, even though the ideas we are reading about are often more complex or dense than those we come across in other sources. To emphasise this point, we used an ‘Academic Ideas’ sheet, amending the title and some of the wording from the Session’s original handout, called ‘Academic Concept Sheet’. Unlike the original handout, we did not, at this stage, ask students to re-state their assignment topic at the top of the page, provide references for their scholarly article and their example or case study, and nor did we ask them to relate their ideas at this stage to the unit’s assignment topic. Instead, students had their assignment topics and a handout about the assignment with them in class, as a clear reminder of what they had to do. The assignment topic asked them to relate a specific scholarly idea to an aspect of their campaign/case, and in the limited time we had, we chose to focus exclusively on developing their confidence to do this in a formal written report style. Therefore, whilst there is merit in getting students to include a concluding sentence which refers back to the assignment wording, in our case (and with time limitations) we did not want to introduce more than this main task. Because of limited time, students were also only asked to provide a brief in-text citation (author, year) when they referred to ideas or quotes from the text. They had practised Harvard referencing style and in text citations in class during their previous written essay assignment.

In both sessions we chose to show students a model of a completed ‘Academic Ideas’ sheet, which we created from a modified, de-identified piece of student writing from the previous year. We did this in order to give students confidence in how much material they should include and what kind of language they should use when filling in the sheet. We emphasised to students that they should not pay too much attention to the concept selected for inclusion in this example of a completed ‘Academic Ideas’ sheet, but rather just pay attention to the way the student had addressed each section of the form. Students were given a few minutes to discuss a key idea and how it related to their assignment with a fellow student, after which they filled in the ‘Academic ideas’ sheet on their own.

In total, this activity including the introduction took about thirty minutes. Here are examples of how students filled out and used the handout.
### Example 1: Hannah’s answer re public relations


The extract was taken from pp8-12.

This is how one student filled in her sheet, relating it to a case study she had previously read about called ‘Step Back Think Campaign’:

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Name the idea and the author/s who discuss it. (Cite)</strong></td>
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<td>SMART objectives are rarely used and this makes it difficult to measure and evaluate PR activities (McNamara 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What does the idea mean? (An example might help explain it)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART objectives in public relations campaigns are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely. They are rarely used because often campaign objectives are set at the top level and not at the level of public relations activities. There is also often a lack of benchmark information against which to measure. In order for SMART objectives to be set, the targets should be agreed by management and aligned with organisational goals. They should include qualitative and quantitative targets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What evidence does the author give in support of the idea? (Cite)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNamara refers to Pavlik (1987) who comments: “PR campaigns, unlike their advertising counterparts, have been plagued by vague, ambiguous objectives” (p. 20). And Wilcox, Ault and Agee (1998) say: “Before any public relations program can be properly evaluated, it is important to have a clearly established set of measurable objectives” (p. 193).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How does the idea relate to an example or case of professional practice? Explain in detail with examples.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Back Think campaign did not set SMART objectives. ‘The eradication of street violence’ is not measurable or achievable. There are no quantitative targets and there is no benchmark data identified against which to measure success.</td>
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Example 2: Ben’s answer re Organisational Communication

In the Organisational Communication class, students were asked to read in advance a 4 page excerpt from an article outlining 6 key points about communication during organisational change. The article was Elving, W (2005) ‘The role of communication in organisational change’, Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 10(2), pp 130-134.

This is what one student produced, relating his scholarly reading to a case study on Fairfax Media that he had previously examined.

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Activity 2: Drafting paragraphs

In the second exercise, again we showed students an example from the previous year’s student writing, noting that this second example was written by the same student whose work we had examined previously in the completed handout, i.e. the example by Hannah or Ben.

We used a powerpoint slide to illustrate the past student’s finished piece of writing, and then went through each section, highlighting how the student had copied her or his notes over from the Academic Ideas sheet and edited them, so that when put them together they ‘flowed’ as a well written paragraph.

Before giving the class time to write up their own paragraphs from their academic ideas sheet, we first made several points:

- It’s important to use your own words in your assignment, but you can also utilise phrases and even longer quotes directly from the article in order to describe the author’s idea
- In order to clearly communicate the relationship between the idea and the assignment case or topic, the writing should introduce, explain and then link the idea to the topic in several clear steps.

We allowed students fifteen minutes for drafting their own paragraph. The international students preferred to work in pairs to produce a paragraph from one of their filled in Academic Ideas sheets, and they needed extra time to do the exercise. Whilst they did that, we asked the other students to share their writing with the person sitting next to them.

Because we had only allocated an hour for this whole session (including exercise 1), we were not able to go through an extended process of getting students to look at and discuss their writing in groups, and then analyse the relationship between students’ filled-in sheets and their paragraphs as a class. Instead, I illustrated the process by which a paragraph can be re-drafted, by choosing one piece of student writing from a class volunteer and projecting it up as a powerpoint whilst the whole class read it. In one group a student had done her writing on her laptop and simply saved it onto a USB which was very easy. In the other group the student read out her paragraph and I typed it up as she read.

When the student’s draft text was visible to the class, I read the sample aloud and asked the class if there was any confusion about the main idea. I suggested some introductory words which might help the reader to follow the text. I asked the class if the writing clearly spelled out how the idea was relevant to a
contemporary case? Again, I made some suggestions to the wording so that the links between sentences and ideas were clearer. The class finished with a brief discussion about the way that all writers need to draft and redraft their writing to make it clear to the reader.

Below are examples of student writing from each of the two groups, which were developed through this exercise.

Example 3: Student writing: Hannah’s answer

Assignment: Evaluate a contemporary Public Relations campaign or activity with reference to the literature on campaign measurement and evaluation.

SMART objectives in public relations campaigns are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely. According to McNamara (2011) they are rarely used because often campaign objectives are set at the top level and not at the level of public relations activities. McNamara claims that there is also often a lack of benchmark information against which to measure. He cites Pavlik (1987) who comments:

“PR campaigns, unlike their advertising counterparts, have been plagued by vague, ambiguous objectives” (p. 20).

Wilcox, Ault and Agee (1998) agree, saying:

“Before any public relations program can be properly evaluated, it is important to have a clearly established set of measurable objectives” (p. 193).

According to McNamara, in order for SMART objectives to be set, the targets should be agreed by management and aligned with organisational goals. They should include qualitative and quantitative targets. The biggest challenge in evaluating the Step Back Think campaign is a failure by the organisation to set SMART objectives. McNamara argues that it is common sense that a campaign does not set objectives that are unachievable, yet the eradication of street violence would likely be considered so. Not only could a number of the objectives be considered unachievable, it also was very difficult to measure the campaign’s objectives through any traditional or cost-effective, public relations methodologies.
Example 4: Student writing: Ben’s answer

**Assignment:** Discuss a recent case of major organisational change in which communication to internal and external audiences was required. Analyse the communication approach adopted by the organisation, with reference to the set literature in this unit.

According to Elving (2005), communication creates the ‘conditions for commitment’ to organisational change. This means that stakeholders are only strongly committed to organisational change if information is presented in adequate amounts. Further, a stakeholder’s sense of belonging and loyalty to the organisation can be strengthened by direct management communication.

Elving cites Postmes et al who claim that:

> people’s sense of belonging to the organisation does not primarily depend on the quality of their informal and social-emotional interactions with peers and proximate colleagues, but it is related more strongly to their appreciation of the management’s communication (Elving 2005, p.132)

Fairfax employed a direct communication strategy with shareholders, focussed on maintaining their sense of loyalty to the Board. However, they did not do this with employees, who had to rely on rumour.

Elving also explains that poor management of communication can also result in rumour and “resistance” to the changes (Elving 2005). Direct communication with stakeholders can increase readiness for change and reduce employee resistance (Elving 2005). Whilst Fairfax was successful in its communication with shareholders, it is clear that the board should have engaged with employees, unions and shareholders equally. This would have reduced employee uncertainty and resistance to change. This could also have provided fresh ideas to the board of ways to reduce costs and increase revenue.

**Some reflections on this exercise**

I would definitely run this session in class again, particularly in preparation for journal writing exercises and written campaign analyses. It works well in building students’ writing skills for connecting ideas, concepts and frameworks in the set class readings to issues, cases and examples discussed in class, or which they come across in their own research. As my course is committed to teaching students to apply theory to practice wherever possible, this is a core skill for successful students.

Ideally, I would build from my one hour version of this exercise (above) to the more complex process laid out in the longer Session outline of this project’s resources. If I had run two sessions earlier in the semester, this process would have
really helped students in their essay assignment, as it would have helped them to discuss concepts from different readings in relation to each other and in answer to an essay question. During essays, my students are often encouraged to weave in ideas from the literature as well as contemporary examples in professional practice in answer to the question. On reflection this requires a number of skills which would benefit from a two-stage approach. 

It can be very challenging meeting the content requirements of a postgraduate unit in 10-12 sessions, and especially so when students have a diverse set of language, learning, professional and cultural backgrounds. It was very interesting to me that students were all able to benefit in some way from the exercise, even though it was clear that some of the international students in the group needed more time to get the most from the learning experience. A more structured and guided session (like the one provided in the main Session on Connecting theory and practice) would probably be very valuable as a longer, two hour session in classes with a predominantly international student cohort.

Although there was very little time to do the last part of the exercise, students expressed their appreciation at seeing how adding simple words and phrases, changes to word order, expression or structure could make the written paragraph much clearer. In the post-session evaluation, the students in both groups commented that the whole session was extremely useful for them, both because it taught them how to organise their notes in a systematic way and also because it gave them an experience of drafting a piece of academic writing with structure and support.

Later in the semester, when units were evaluated, domestic and international students in both groups again commented that this session was particularly valuable to their learning because it helped them to read and take notes in a focussed way, and to apply ideas to examples using academic conventions and structure. They asked that in future more sessions like this be run prior to the first essay assignment.

Dr Maree Keating
Victoria University