

# Accepting the Challenge: Experiential learning as an educational factor in student learning about public relations strategy

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## Abstract

*Experiential learning makes an important contribution to students' understanding of the realities of professional public relations practice. This experience is most often gained through practical, off-campus internships and projects with local organisations. The research reported here found that voluntary participation in a unique experiential learning partnership between students, the profession, a university, and not-for-profit organisations delivers a significant learning subsidy for students in a capstone public relations strategy unit.*

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## Introduction

Experiential learning has an important role in public relations education, usually through internship placements in consultancies, commercial business, not-for-profits, and government agencies. In teaching for many other disciplines, experiential learning is a significant component of the educational process (Milne and Alderman, 1996; Lubbers, 2011). Cookson (2006) describes experiential learning as the most powerful kind of learning because it influences the organisation of the brain. Cookson was writing about primary school age children, but his view is reflected in Berger's discussion of active learning in public relations education. Berger notes that experiential learning away from the classroom is a common approach in active learning and 'strengthens a student's skills, decision-making, interpersonal competence, and knowledge acquisition and application' (2002: 192). Berger reported research showing students learnt more about 'real-world-work' in out-of-class experiences. That finding supports cognitive theories of information processing that suggest students learn more when they are required to apply information in new situations (Berger, 1998). Werder and Strand (2011) noted that future public relations practitioners must have real-world communication and business skills, and demonstrate the ability to develop strategic plans based on theory and research. To do this, students need to experience real organisational situations to manage publics more effectively and to develop strategies (Werder and Strand, 2011).

This paper analyses students' academic performance in a university public relations degree capstone unit by comparing marks of those who participated voluntarily in a unique, extra curricula, real-life, experiential learning project, with the marks of students who did not participate. The analysis, which covered a four-year period, suggests that students who participate in real-life experiential learning are more likely to achieve statistically significant better marks in the capstone unit – Public Relations Strategy, often described as PR Campaigns – on average than those who do not participate. The analysis suggests that extra-curricula experiences of this kind deliver significant learning subsidies for participants.

## Experiential learning in public relations education

Experiential learning is an important component of public relations learning because it provides students with opportunities to observe practice, apply principles and skills developed at university, and to understand what Milne and Alderman (1996) described as the concept of a profession. The 'public relations academy' (Daugherty, 2011: 470) regards experiential learning as valuable in undergraduate programs and embraces industry and professional association policy that it is imperative (PRSA, 1999). Swanson (2011) found in a worldwide study of public relations programs that curricula generally reflected the 2006 minimum standard recommended by the 2006 (US) Commission on Public Relations Education that degree sequences include supervised work experience. The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) also encourages internships as part of university education and its university course accreditation guidelines urge further experiential learning strategies and engagement with, and mentoring by, senior practitioners, including '...real world assessment tasks sourced from industry, case studies, work experience ...' (PRIA, 2009: 3). Internships offer benefits to both the internee and the employer (PRIA, 2009). The Public Relations Society of America's report, *Public Relations Education for the 21st Century* (1999), argued it was imperative that public relations students apply the skills and principles they learn to the professional arena through supervised work experience and that public relations teaching should emphasise 'active learning'. Anderson (1999), a former national president of the PRIA, argued that internships enabled students to become familiar with the ethos, demands and procedures of business and practice.

While research on outcomes from experiential learning in public relations education has provided a rich literature on internships (see, for example, Daugherty, 2011: 471), little has dealt with other forms of experiential learning, especially service learning as described by Jacoby (1996, cited in Werder *et al*, 2011). Service learning enables students to address human and community needs through structured opportunities designed to promote learning and development.

Experiential learning in any form provides what Daugherty (2011) described as valuable real-life experience through its role as a training tool that helps students discover long-term aspirations. Kolb argued that this kind of experience plays a 'central role' in learning (1984: 20) because knowledge is continuously derived from, and tested out in, the experiences of the learner. Kolb also argued that this kind of learning helped students to form and re-form through their experiences. The inclusion of experiential learning in public relations degree courses reflects Kolb's arguments, especially when students use their practice skills, and investigate how professionals apply (or maybe do not apply) theoretical concepts. Marshall (1999) noted the opportunities internships, especially, give students to reflect on situations where problems are real, and solutions to them are often complex. This reflects Milne and Alderman's (1996) observation that concepts of a profession could not be developed by an academic education in the same way that can be gained from working alongside committed practitioners, and Anderson's (1999) argument that public relations students need to understand the ethos and demands of professional practice.

Kirby (2005) found that regional employers of public relations graduates highly valued specific public relations work experience of the kind provided by internships when they were selecting employees, echoing Gibson's (2001) point that a successful professional internship enhanced career prospects.

Students also value experiential learning experiences that enable them to learn job skills, have a good relationship with a supervisor, and create an opportunity for advancement (Beebe *et al*, 2009). In a phenomenological study involving 223 final year interns and 183 supervisors, Daugherty (2011) compared student and supervisor internship experiences, finding that good interns took initiatives, were independent but took direction from supervisors, and had a solid work ethic.

Mahoney (2006) studied another aspect of experiential learning applied to a structured university assessment applied via a professional environment. The assessment involved journalism students questioning public relations students about a media kit prepared by the latter. The interviews were conducted in a formal television studio setting, and were recorded for assessment. Mahoney (2006) found that while they were apprehensive about doing the interviews, public relations students valued the opportunity to experience a television interview in a professional setting. Public relations students reported that while they discovered that they needed to be better prepared for an interview of this kind, they were able to use their public relations writing skills, put 'people skills] (student comment, p.185) into practice, and that the interviews 'transferred the text book into a practical setting' (student comment, p. 189). Mahoney argued that the results of this study suggested that other forms of experiential learning as it is applied in, for example, teacher, nursing, physiotherapy and legal education, might be adapted to enhance the use of this pedagogical approach in public relations teaching.

At one large US university, Werder and Strand (2011) used a longitudinal study to analyse experiential learning outcomes among 210 public relations students in a capstone unit, in which they develop a strategic communication plan for local organisations. This activity mirrors the experiential and service learning focus of the structured voluntary project, which is the subject of the current research: the PRIA ACT Division's annual Student Communication Challenge.

## **The Student Communication Challenge**

The challenge is a structured service-learning opportunity that meets a community service goal to assist, *pro bono*, small not-for-profit community groups. The Challenge was initiated in 2003 and is designed to give public relations students '...an opportunity to work as a team and produce communications solutions for a real client ...' (PRIA ACT, 2009). It links the profession with tertiary students and the not-for-profit sector in an annual *pro bono* community service exercise. Teams of three or four final year public relations students from the University of Canberra (UC) and the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) volunteer to research and develop public relations or communication strategies for small, not-for-profit community organisations. A co-ordinating committee comprising representatives of the PRIA, UC and CIT allocate clients to student teams, each of which is mentored by a senior practitioner who is a Member or Fellow of the PRIA. Client organisations apply to be included in the Challenge while mentors are volunteers. The number of client organisations has varied from a maximum of eight to a minimum of four (in 2011). The coordinating committee assesses student strategies in two formats: a 5000-word written strategic plan and an eight-minute oral presentation. Strategies are prepared in accordance with the format and definitions used for PRIA national Golden Target Awards. Winners are announced at the PRIA ACT Annual Awards for Excellence event each September.

The challenge's purposes are to highlight the importance of the practical application of public relations students' learning by providing them with industry experience, encouraging high standards of public relations practice in a mentored environment, and assisting community organisations (PRIA ACT, 2009a). Clients are advised that it is their decision whether they implement the strategies that the students recommend (PRIA ACT, 2009b). Some have.

Clients, students and mentors are briefed on the challenge and given a brief lecture on public relations strategy at an initial meeting. This is followed by individual client briefing, in which they expand on their written problem definition to students and mentor. Students arrange a series of follow meetings with clients and their mentors.

In the first nine years of the Challenge, more than 300 students and 45 local community groups participated.

## **The research**

This research project was designed to test an anecdotal observation that UC students who participate in the challenge achieve higher results in the capstone unit, Public Relations Strategy, than those who do not participate. The research did not include CIT students because the CIT's Advanced Diploma does not cover the same communication theory and professional practice curriculum as the UC degree program.

UC students who volunteer to participate in the challenge are enrolled in the Bachelor of Public Relations program. They have not studied public relations strategy, but have completed a communication research methodology unit, public relations theory, and basic professional skills units, including those dealing with the principles of integrated marketing communication, and writing for public relations. They have also completed a law of communications unit, one on communication, history and society and a third unit that surveys media industries and audiences. At the time the challenge starts each March, UC students are enrolled in Public Relations Practice, a 3rd Year unit that applies professional skills to explorations of contexts such as corporate communication, public affairs and lobbying, financial public relations, community groups, sponsorship and fundraising, and crisis communication. This unit also introduces them to situation analysis. Students are also undertaking, or have already completed, a mandatory public relations internship, and studying a unit dealing with risk and crisis communication theory. In the last weeks of the challenge each August, students are exploring the theories, concepts and principles of planning in Public Relations Strategy, as well as taking a political communication unit.

## **Research hypotheses**

The research tested the following hypotheses:

- H1: Students who participate in the UC PRIA Student Challenge achieve higher overall results on average in the capstone unit, Public Relations Strategy, than those who do not.
- H2: The difference in overall results on average between UC PRIA Student Challenge participants and non-participants in the capstone will be statistically significant.
- H3: Voluntary student participation in the UC PRIA Student Challenge delivers a learning subsidy towards understanding public relations strategy.

## Method

The study used a quantitative method to analyse marks for 238 final year students who were enrolled in the capstone Public Relations Strategy unit in the period 2008–2011. Marks achieved by 39 participants in the Student Challenge were compared with those for 199 non-participants. The study analysed marks in three categories: (1) a mandatory assignment, (2) a mandatory end-of-semester, written, three-hour examination, and (3) overall unit marks. Scores for each of the three categories were aggregated to produce average outcomes for each in the 2008–2011 student cohorts. Calculations were made in an Excel spreadsheet and paired *t* tests ( $p \leq .05$ ) were used to determine the statistical significance of the results.

The mandatory assignment and the examination directly tested students' understanding of the conceptual and professional practice aspects of strategic public relations planning. The assignment required students to apply previously learnt research techniques to plan and write a public relations strategy for an organisation selected from 'Gold' prize winners in the annual Australasian Reporting Awards. Organisations were allocated by tutors to individual students. The assignment tested students' application of the principles of strategic public relations planning, including issue identification and analysis for a situation analysis. The three-hour end-of-semester examination tested student understanding of strategic public relations planning concepts provided through readings and thirteen weekly lectures, and their direct application to situations identified in the exam paper.

The analysis did not include student scores for a third mandatory assessment, an oral presentation on an academic journal article. This was excluded because it involved students explaining only one public relations strategy element to peers in a classroom setting. This meant, for example, a student using an academic case study on the 2011 Mexican Gulf oil-rig explosion to explain how BP used public relations tactics to communicate with stakeholders.

Challenge participants were all volunteers in teams of three or four members to develop strategic plans for small, not-for-profit organisations. They started their projects before they studied public relations strategy. Each team had a senior professional as a mentor. Students, mentors and client representatives were given a lecture on strategic public relations planning, and provided with the format for PRIA Golden Target award strategies, at an initial challenge briefing. Challenge clients included, for example, organisations like the National Brain Injury Foundation, Sailability (an organisation that helps disabled people learn to sail), ACT Cancer Council, Arthritis ACT, Men's Health, and small local environmental, community, and aged-care groups. Clients sought strategies to raise target public awareness of the organisation, promote the community contributions of groups, launch specific programs, promote environmental protection for local areas, or to assist fundraising.

The study methodology did not include an assessment of student, mentor or client experiences with the challenge. Anecdotal evidence, however, is that clients appreciate the student-developed strategies, and one organisation has, for example, appointed a former participant to its management board, while a small number of clients have engaged students to implement their strategies.

## Results

Only 16.4% ( $n=39$ ) of the total number of students enrolled in Public Relations Strategy in the four years included in the study participated in the challenge. The majority of participants were

female (n=32), reflecting the general gender balance of the UC public relations degree. Challenge participation in each year was consistent, averaging 16.5% (SD =2.2) of the total enrolment in PR Strategy in each year studied. An average of 10 students participated in each year (SD=1.7), see Table 1.

**Table 1: Challenge participation, 2008–2011 (Total n=238)**

YEAR	Participants			Non-participants		
	n	% Year	% Total	n	% Year	% Total
2008	10	15.4	4.2	55	84.6	23.1
2009	9	14.3	3.8	54	85.7	22.7
2010	12	19.4	5.0	50	80.6	21.0
2011	8	16.7	3.4	40	83.3	16.4
TOTAL	39		16.4	199		83.6
Average	9.8	16.5		49.8	83.6	
SD	1.7	2.19		6.8	2.19	

Average scores for a total of 238 students were analysed, as follows.

Paired *t* tests ( $p \leq .05$ ) found that, on average, challenge participants achieved statistically significant higher outcomes in the two assessments, and in overall unit outcomes, than non-participants (see Table 2). In three of the years studied, the difference in overall unit outcomes was more than five marks on average. The highest average difference, in 2010, being 9.6%.

In total, participants averaged 74.3% (out of a potential 100 marks) as an overall unit outcome (n=39), an average of 6.3% more marks on average than non-participants ( $p = 0.0154$ ).

For the public relations strategy assignment, participants achieved an average of 26.6 marks (out of a possible 45 marks), a 2.95% better average result than non-participants ( $p = 0.0126$ ). For the exam, participants scored an average of 24 marks (out of a possible 35 marks), 1.4% on average better marks than non-participants ( $p = 0.0177$ ).

**Table 2: Comparison of assignment and unit outcomes, 2008-2011**

Year	n	Participants			n	Non-participants			Difference in totals
		Strategy Exam	Exam	Total		Strategy Exam	Exam	Total	
2008	10	22.1	24.4	73.1	55	20.7	23.3	69.5	3.6
2009	9	24.6	24.6	74.7	54	21.6	22.6	69.3	5.4
2010	12	29.3	24.8	76.8	50	25.4	23.2	67.2	9.6
2011	8	30.3	22.1	72.6	40	26.8	21.4	66.0	6.6
Average	9.8	26.6	24.0	74.3	49.8	23.6	22.6	68.0	6.3
SD	1.7	3.4	1.1	1.6	6.8	2.5	0.8	1.5	2.2

Total challenge participants = 39; female = 32 (82%); male = 7 (18%)

The results strongly confirmed Hypothesis 1 that challenge participants achieve higher overall results on average in the capstone unit Public Relations Strategy than students who do not participate (the average difference in 2008-2011 = 6.3%).

Paired *t* tests ( $p \leq .05$ ) confirmed Hypothesis 2. The average difference in overall unit results between challenge participants and non-participants was statistically significant ( $p = 0.0154$ ). While the margins were lower, in each year of the study, challenge participants also achieved higher marks on average for the two assessment items than non-participants (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 3 was also confirmed: extra-curricula voluntary experiential learning did deliver a clear learning subsidy to participants that was not enjoyed by non-participants. Help in earning higher grades is among the benefits students receive from group participation (Shimazoe and Aldrich, 2010).

In a qualitative sense, the results reinforce the challenge's purposes of providing students with practical industry experience, encouraging high standards of public relations practice in a mentored environment, and assisting community organisations.

## Discussion

Kolb *et al* (1999) found that people with balanced learning profiles are more sophisticated (adaptively flexible) learners. Kolb (1984) argued that ideas were formed and re-formed through experience. The value of experiential learning in public relations education through internships and real-life projects is widely recognised and provides some of the balanced learning described by Kolb *et al* (1999). This study examined experiential learning from a unique perspective: a structured voluntary partnership between the profession, university students, and small not-for-profit organisations. The partnership delivers professional communication solutions for the organisations, and quality mentoring advice for students.

Participation in the Challenge is an example of structured service learning described by Jacoby (1996 cited in Werder *et al*, 2011) because students have an opportunity to engage in *pro bono* practice that addresses human and community needs. When they voluntarily participate in the challenge to work in groups to address community issues, students are not only applying the social skills needed to work effectively in groups, but are demonstrating their civic values (values about equality in civil society) that are among the six benefits of group participation identified by Shimazoe and Aldrich (2010). The other five benefits were promoting deep learning, developing positive attitudes towards autonomous learning, promoting personal growth, higher order thinking skills, and helping to earn higher grades. It may be that the challenge teams already possess civic values that lead them to participate in extra-curricula voluntary activities of this kind. Perhaps this is a demonstration of the sense of altruism that is one of the attributes of the so-called Generation Y which comprised the cohort studied for this research. On the other hand, some may participate as a result of peer pressure from friends who need team members. Further research could usefully test these issues. In particular, pre-challenge qualitative interviews might ask participants about the factors that led them to participate. Post-challenge research might examine how participants' theoretical understanding of strategic public relations planning developed, and was applied, during the challenge. Such research could be based on questions framed around Shimazoe's and Aldrich's (2010) six benefits of group participation. It could also test whether students' ideas about strategic public relations planning changed (Kolb, 1984) during the course of the challenge, as one way of understanding their learning processes.

The study confirms previous research about the value of experiential learning. In particular, it has identified a statistically significant learning subsidy towards understanding strategic public relations planning for students who participate in the challenge. The outcomes of the study also reflect Shimazoe and Aldrich's (2010) finding that group work helps students to earn higher grades.

These outcomes may be explained by factors outside student participation in the challenge. Students who participate in the Challenge may be high academic achievers in any case and the learning subsidy they achieve by participating may result from their already high-order thinking skills and positive attitudes towards autonomous learning. That in turn may lead to higher scores in assignments and exams. It may also be that participants become involved because they view the challenge as a way of enhancing their personal learning, a view they might take as a result of their already high achievement and thinking skills. Further research examining individual student marks and grade points averages, and qualitative interviews, may help to explicate this. Additionally, future research could be extended to participants' performances in other units, both in the Public Relations Major and elective units to assess whether they are, in any case, generally higher achievers than non-participants.

In an editorial introducing the 2011 special pedagogy issue of *Public Relations Review*, Taylor notes the challenge involved in measuring public relations student outcomes, a challenge that is '...even greater in classes where students are encouraged to work in groups' (p.439). Group work is common in public relations courses, especially in capstone strategy or campaigns units (see Lubbers, 2011). Often students find group work difficult. Lubbers (2011) notes that a key student negative towards group work involves the motivation of individual students in which 'free riding' by some students means that they contribute little to the project, while those who do contribute face the 'sucker effect' in which they reduce their efforts in the face of the free-riders (Davies, 2009; see Davies, 2009, for a discussion of common problems associated with group work).

Grade outcomes suggest that group work was not an issue for challenge participants, perhaps because they self-selected their groups and all were volunteers. However, future research could usefully use qualitative methods to examine group dynamics and member contributions during the challenge, perhaps by utilising Lubbers's (2011) peer assessment instrument. Such research could also investigate whether students who participate in the Challenge prefer group work to individual assignments, a preference that would likely enhance their learning subsidy, given the nature of the challenge.

The smallest difference in average marks between the two groups (1.3%) was in end-of-semester exam results. This may be explained by the timing of the exam: all students sat the exam at the end of the teaching program so had access to the same information. This may also explain the smaller variation (2.9%) in average results for the strategy assignment, which in each year was submitted towards the end of semester. In any event, some students are comfortable sitting exams, others are not, and this may also explain the closer exam outcome.

The low overall participation of male students (n=7, 2.9% of the total four-year 3rd year cohort, n=238) may have had minimal impact on the outcomes as female students dominate enrolments in public relations courses meaning there were fewer males to participate in any case.



## Conclusion

Voluntary participation in the annual PRIA (ACT) Student Challenge delivers a learning subsidy for understanding strategy, often the capstone unit in public relations degree programs, for final year students. Understanding strategy is an essential skill for beginning practitioners who hope to engage in professional work beyond technical practice. Lubbers (2011) notes that understanding campaign (strategic) planning is an important element of public relations curricula. The team-work, critical thinking and interpersonal communication involved in the challenge are essential to higher-order professional practice.

In view of the outcomes of this research, public relations academics may consider it worthwhile to offer a similar voluntary service learning opportunity outside the formal curriculum for their final-year cohorts in which senior practitioners mentor students to research and plan communication programs for small not-for-profit organisations under the umbrella of an industry association as a way of enhancing community service.

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