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Intercultural interpretations: making public relations education culturally relevant

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Abstract

Public relations educators delivering courses to international students find that each cohort of students interprets and understands public relations theory and its application to practice according to their respective cultures. The premise of this paper is to reflect on some of the interpretations and expectations of public relations students enrolled in postgraduate master classes from 2003 to 2007 in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia, at the University of South Australia. The Australian masters' classes include cohorts of international students from diverse cultures. This paper suggests that public relations educators need to adapt their style of delivery and methods of assessment to facilitate optimum engagement of diverse groups of students taking account their varied political, religious and social backgrounds that shape their thinking and perception of public relations theory and practice.

Introduction

This paper's focus on postgraduate public relations education in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia presents some international public relations perspectives that could be considered in a range of intercultural, or varied cultural education environments. Public relations education and practice are rapidly changing and scholars (Gower, 2006; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003) indicate that a Western point of view has dominated the way that public relations is understood. Gower suggests that the 'Western, ethnocentric worldview' (Gower, 2006, p178) has been central to the normative approach of public relations theory (Hunt & Grunig,1994; Deatherage & Hazelton, 1998; Holtzhausen, 2005; Kent & Taylor, 2007) that emphasises how public relations should be understood and practised rather than how it is practised. The development of public relations theory is in its early stages and it will 'someday provide a foundation for the merging profession and its practice' (Broom, 2006, p141) that incorporates intercultural perspectives with global relevance and applicability. This will take time in an emerging discipline that is establishing its professionalism. As Guth and Marsh (2007, p5) point out 'there is not even a consensus as to what to call the profession' so there is a way to go to develop benchmarks and standards for practice. Some scholars posit that the 'public relations field still lacks an international body of knowledge from which to frame education for public relations in any sort of international model' (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2006, p346) so that establishing professional frameworks to direct education and practice may not as yet be possible.

As public relations theory and practice is developing this paper points to some of the inter-cultural considerations when communication between students from different cultures takes place. The cross-cultural or intercultural context refers to students of different cultures studying public relations and applying public relations and communication theory to their cultures or making sense of theory as it applies to public relations practice in their part of the world. A deliberate practical approach gives a glimpse of effective cross-cultural exchanges between students as they explore what public relations means to them. The intention is therefore not to present an analysis of cross cultural theory of public relations education but, rather, to present the possibilities of teaching public relations and communication theory to students from varied cultures, and begin to understand how this teaching can be made relevant to them. As Kent and Taylor (2007, p13) contend 'what ultimately matters is understanding the practice of public relations in each nation, not proving whether a country/region conforms to one theory/model' so that public relations is understood in terms of where it is practised or situated.

If public relations educators and practitioners 'are unprepared for international and intercultural responsibilities', (Peterson & Mak, 2006, p416) they may find their public relations efforts ineffective. In intercultural exchanges the public relations practitioner or educator can work towards common or agreed goals when various cultural interpretations are recognised and included in those exchanges (Montenegro, 2004). The dominance of the Western worldview is no longer the focus of that exchange (Gower, 2006).

In this discussion of intercultural exchanges it is useful to refer to international 'as a way of referring to communication activities that are performed in nations and multi-national regions' (Banks, 2000) that encompass many cultural exchanges. Banks refers to the definition of international as 'not being precisely the same as global' (p105) as a global concept is all encompassing including myriads of cultures and cultural contexts. As Cummings (cited in Matera & Artigue, 2000) puts it, the global village has 'always implied more than just a global shopping mall and a nexus of electronic tools' (p242) as there is considerable 'global cultural diversity' and many cultural microcosms make up diverse cultures. Diversity can be understood as being part of a global convergence model where emphasis is on global similarity amongst cultures or, conversely, understood as part of a divergence model where the individual needs of cultures are considered as part of globalisation (Lee, 2005, p15). Contemporary public relations practitioners are managing diverse publics that may function and have a world-view of public relations but these publics relate their world-view to their culture, their political environment and the role of media in their culture.

International– local perspectives and understandings

The public relations educator may have an understanding of some cultures, speak several languages and have lived in varied cultural environments but this does not sufficiently prepare the educator for effective intercultural teaching. When students arrive in class or communicate through online course websites that are part of the author's teaching program, these students' expectations evolve around their experiences as they interpret theory and the application of it, through the lens of their respective cultures. Public relations intercultural studies provide insight into possible student perspectives (Yungwook & Karadjov, 2001). For example, South Korean public relations practices are primarily influenced by Confucianism where loyalty to authority is very important. On the other hand Bulgarian public relations practice is affected by a great deal of scepticism as Bulgaria is in transition from an authoritarian, communist regime to a more open system of government. These scholars' findings show that in these cultures 'indirect communication is the manifestation of the Confucian tradition in Korea, but double talk and oblique communication come from scepticism of authority in Bulgaria' (p78). The varying influence of political relations determines what public relations can be practised (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2001), and it determines the influence of media. In Bulgaria and South Korea the media's influence is extensive resulting in the primary model of practice being press agentry and propaganda. As such the experience of two-way symmetrical communication integral to the 'dominate normative theoretical paradigm' (Gower, 2006, p179) of Western public relations education would not only be rare but not even anticipated or expected by practitioners or by students from these countries studying public relations.

Other scholars (Kent & Taylor, 2007, p12) point to the complexity of culture as information is solicited in different ways in Eastern cultures, less direct for example, as compared to the way it is solicited in the United States. Eastern cultures such as the Estonia cultures functioning in the post-communist era are in transition from a society dominated by government control to beginning to value open communication. In this transition phase Estonian public relations continues to deal with a sceptical public that is finding it difficult to accept new messages or the promotion of new public relations programs (Tampere, 2002). The primary consideration for the public is adjusting, questioning and coming to terms with a vastly changing political, social and economic environment where communication is slowly becoming more transparent. Tampere indicates that much of the communication is one way in the form of information going to the public with little dialogue or discussion taking place.

Tampere also suggests that despite cultural differences and the challenges of managing and understanding public relations in the transition phase of a country, there are also many shared understandings and shared difficulties: 'Problems in today's Estonian public relations field are similar to problems all over the world: ethics, qualification standards, relations with journalists, 'closedness' and asymmetry in organisational communication, social responsibility, the use of propaganda etc' (p118).

Public relations practitioners and educators need to be aware of what they have in common alongside those aspects of public relations that identify and make cultures unique. Practitioners practising in intercultural environments find that 'the basic program elements do not change cross-culturally. Research, objectives, methods, programming, and message dissemination remain the same. The variable is the audience' (Matera & Artigue, 2000, p241). For public relations educators this variable audience is represented by each cohort of students studying public relations. This paper suggests that public relations educators ought to take time to understand the variables of each student cohort so that the balance between shared intercultural experiences and those that are significantly different can be carefully managed. The important point according to Banks (2000) is to grasp the situational context of the learning exchange. Banks goes on to say that for international public relations practice to be effective it is insufficient 'knowing other cultures' rituals, languages, social norms and values' (p113) so that what is known about one culture in a particular context may change with clients from the same culture in a different context. The emphasis is on the approach to varied intercultural public relations practises rather than on knowing all about cultures and the public relations practice of these cultures.

In different political and legal systems 'there are also different views of what public relations is and what communication channels it should use' (Botan, 1992, p156). An understanding of public relations and its effectiveness is complex in any culture (Chia, 2005; 2008). The choice of media is also becoming more complex as online media becomes increasingly important to communication exchanges. Scholars (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Goodman 2006) point to weblogs and online dialogue important to relationship building between organisations and the public and important to the way publics communicate to governments. These publics might be communicating online in Malaysia, Australia or Singapore. In Singapore, even though the government limits media reporting about its activities, Singaporeans are demanding to have more input to the government of their country through blogging and online interaction (Tilson & Alozie, 2004). The impact of these changes has been noted in the author's teaching experience with Singaporean students keen to express their views and take part in vigorous online exchanges.

Knowledge of culture makes practitioners and educators more sensitive to subtle cultural differences that have an impact on interpretation of public relations practices (El-Astal, 2005). However, what is known cannot be relied on as public relations practice and the understanding of it is constantly changing. Ekachai's (1995) study of Thai public relations roles (applying Broom's[i] role scales) found that the prevalence of the publicity model and the focus on communication by giving information to the public, was 'moving towards two-way asymmetric communication in public relations practice' (p334) with some emphasis on community consultation. Wu (2005) suggests that in Asian countries rather than an asymmetrical or symmetrical model of communication the model might be relational and interpersonal as 'Asian cultures are collectivistic' (p12) rather than individualistic[ii]. Interpersonal relationships and connections are central to communication and public relations practice in many Asian cultures.

Other scholars (Guth & Marsh, 2005; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2001) posit that Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions are critical in guiding and directing public relations understanding of intercultural and international public relations theory and practice. The important point for educators is to be aware of these wider cultural dimensions[iii] so that theories understood in one environment are not put forward as central to all theoretical understanding (Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg, 2006). Some scholars (Holtzhausen, Peterson & Tindall, 2003) also caution that application of models of public relations practice from 'U.S. models to international research settings' should be replaced by 'using methods that best suit their cultural environments' (p338).

Even with an understanding of wider cultural perspectives a study of the way different cultures respond to airline disasters shows that misunderstandings of words such as 'emergency and priority' (Pinsdorf, 1991, p49) contributed to an airline crash and loss of life (Avianca flight 52, 1990, 72 of 161 passengers killed). For the public relations educator Pinsdorf's message is precautionary, as misinterpretations of words or concepts will not have the same fatal outcome as an air-crash but it highlights the need to constantly check out students' insights and comprehension of concepts. Practitioners and educators need to encourage discussion in teams where the opinions and ideas of team members and individuals are sought (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2005, p236) and where different ways to communicate facilitate shared communication about varying cultural points of view.

Intercultural education

To be aware of the way in which public relations educators develop skills in intercultural education this paper presents some of the changes that have been made to the teaching and assessment of students in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia where international student cohorts undertake public relations studies. This paper suggests that public relations educators need to be flexible and develop an understanding of public relations around the unique contributions of each cohort of students. Students studying public relations in the Australian, Singaporean and Malaysian classes included Indian, Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese, Malay, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Danish, Polish, Russian, Chinese–primarily from Beijing, American and Australian. These students shared a common interest in choosing to study public relations whatever its interpretation. They studied in fast-track mode where 20 hours in-class contact time was complemented by an online course website and online discussion facility. The class sizes varied from 15 to 25 students ideal for

small group engagement allowing time for intercultural interpretation, discussion, sharing and adjustment to assessment tasks.

A critical first step is to understand the context of each group of students. Exchange of information, exchange of cultural points of view is factored in to each study program for each student cohort in order to understand students' expectations of a public relations course or program, what they hope to learn, how they want to use this knowledge and what some of the challenges might be. To achieve this understanding students are divided into international teams with an international team leader who could represent any cultural group depending on the cultural representation of each cohort of students. Students interview each other about their understanding of public relations. The class together develops their international-local public relations framework. This framework or course template is added to and revised throughout the seminars so that each *class creates its own culture of learning*. In an Australian class, for example, including students from six different cultures, the public relations framework evolved around;

- Polish post-communist era of public relations and the dominance of Polish media as compared to the perceived role of the Australian media that was described as being manipulative and setting its own agenda.
- Vietnamese public relations which was described as attempting to re-brand Vietnam through a range of promotional initiatives and finding its direction in a structured political environment.
- Danish public relations model that was perceived as very open and affected by the need for constant change in a competitive European market where creative public relations campaigns were required to capture new markets.
- Malaysian public relations that were perceived as being more democratic than in the past but definitely not Western, affected by the dominance of media controlling its message dissemination.
- Thai public relations that was growing rapidly as Thai media continued to be controlled by the government. Communication between public relations practitioners and the community was subtle and less direct than in Western society.
- Australian public relations that was perceived as being persuasive with open communication where activists were taking a greater role in influencing the direction of change on many issues.

These understandings of public relations were then considered in relation to selected readings and case studies from a variety of sources so that the students built a body of knowledge and understanding of public relations theory and practice. Students in each cohort also contributed to the online course website by posting useful links on international public relations perspectives and how theory might be interpreted differently in respective cultures. This was an engaging way to expand the knowledge of public relations practice and how it adapts to varying political, economic and social environments.

When students prepared their public relations issues management team presentations there was considerable dialogue, at times argument, about proposed issues plans. Discussion about public relations plans to manage an issue such as credit-card debt where plans effective in one culture seem ineffective in other cultures, develop sound knowledge of the difficulty of applying public relations principles and concepts cross-culturally. Students' focus on the needs of diverse cultures and publics results in many excellent discussions about global and specific cultural components of the issue. In one student cohort Malaysian students presented their public relations plan for managing HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) with global statistics and public relations plans from various countries. The main Malaysian public relations strategy was to increase awareness for prevention of this disease and to do so through participation in Worlds AIDS Day, organise a range of local activities with Malaysian art and dance and design colourful promotional posters to promote the campaign in a relevant and culturally acceptable way. When students explored the issue they reported that they were aware that:

- Many excellent public relations strategies were in place in managing this issue in other cultures.
- Strategies from other cultures were easily adapted to fit the needs of the Malaysian campaign.
- The AIDS message needed to be subtle with the Malaysian AIDS foundation launching a 'Hope Campaign' to increase awareness about the dangers of unprotected sex and intravenous drug use rather than replicating some of the direct campaigns of some other countries that might prove to be offensive to Malaysians.
- When international perspectives were considered and expected there was less discussion about what was Malaysian and more concentration on the best public relations plan for this issue. Malaysian students reported that they were surprised at the extensive HIV, AIDS public relations activities and programs that had been planned in their region. Malaysian media often portrayed a very negative picture about the management of this issue outside of Malaysia.
- Students became aware of public relations developments in their own culture when these plans were compared to those in other cultures. The local-global and regional focus resulted in a good understanding of possibilities and opportunities for best public relations practice.

The aim of the issues management exercise is to extend students' perspectives as they are part of the international community alongside the community in which they practice public relations. The emphasis on intercultural contexts in other masters public relations topics such as crisis management and corporate social responsibility is also carried over from one class to the next so that understanding of corporate social responsibility in India (Reddi, 2005) where it is embedded in the culture becomes part of the discussion of Australian corporate social responsibility where it is slowly becoming more important to corporate culture (Sarre, 2002). Singaporean case studies such as Singapore's Telecom's Touching Lives Fund (Tongzon, 2004) a corporate government–community partnership, are included in the curriculum together with Australian cases. Thailand's Burson-Marsteller's depression-disorder awareness campaign (Hanpongpandh, 2006) is included in the masters' courses. The awareness campaign was important as '50 to 70 percent of all suicides are caused by depressive disorder,' (Hanpongpandh, 2006, p347) and the prevalence of suicide in teenagers and children was very high. Hanpongpandh (p353) suggests that it 'would have been helpful for the campaign planners to know more about the existing attitudes toward and knowledge about depression' in Thailand so that public relations efforts could be of greatest benefit to the Thai people. This case is considered from each culture's perspective and Thai students in each cohort are cultural consultants for this exercise.

All assessments include an analysis of theory and practice and case studies as they apply to the students' cultures and to the wider international context. This has been most important to some international students from Malaysia, Singapore and China who find Hunt and Grunig's (1994) asymmetric theory very easy to relate to as they say that much of the communication from their governments to the public is asymmetric. However symmetric communication, dialogue and consultation and theoretical concepts critical to systems theory such as transparency and openness (Theaker, 2008) seem quite foreign to these students. Transparent, two-way communication is not encouraged and may not necessarily be perceived as best practice public relations in their cultures, a point put forward by some scholars in the introduction to this paper (Kent & Taylor, 2007). Rather, taking into account Wu's (2005) point about the importance of relationships in decision-making it may be more important to develop sound public relations practice through personal contacts and relationships that have been developed over time.

Challenges in intercultural contexts

When the public relations educator facilitates a process of constant class exchange where public relations crisis management, issues management and corporate social responsibility models and theories extend the parameters of learning, students have many opportunities to embrace learning from varied perspectives. However, public relations education in Singapore and Malaysia may be difficult when students agree with the educator because it is seen to be the right thing to do even when the may have a different point of view. Further, Hill and Dixon (2006, p86) point out that 'effectiveness in intercultural communication is an art with few absolutes and wild variety'. It is because of this wild variety even the best teaching plans in intercultural environments can be affected by the way students

adapt to the teaching and their expectation of it. As Hill and Dixon point out, in high context cultures where people speak out and express their views (United States) as compared to low context cultures where 'far less verbally explicit' (p81) behaviour is the norm, there may be conflict in managing these different ways of communicating.

In most student cohorts some students experienced frustration and struggled to understand some concepts within their cultures. Students, for example, explored the management of media in their respective countries with some frustration. Through a focus on agenda setting theory (Mackey, 2000) and how this theory might apply in different cultures, students gained understanding of media moguls and their agendas at the global level as well as their local media's agendas and why aspects of reporting may not be possible. The aim was to provide opportunity to develop cultural understanding beyond their cultural perspective but at the same time recognise the political sensitivity and difficulty of open discussion about media in some cultures.

In crisis management seminars students participated in simulated crisis cases that had global ramifications and local impact where public relations management was required at many different levels. Each student cohort developed a crisis team with cultural experts taking a lead at various points of the exercise. In a Malaysian class where contaminated food was part of the crisis scenario requiring public relations intervention, students' initial response was limited as the students explained that contaminated food was so common in Malaysia that the public did not pay attention to the problem unless there was a death or tragedy. Until the scenario was changed students found it difficult to relate to and think about public relations crisis management plans. Singaporean students also reported that there was a tendency to cover-up crises until a death or tragedy made reporting of the crisis a necessity. Australian student cohorts also wanted to change the in-class crisis scenarios to incorporate the changes in Singapore and Malaysian seminars. An intercultural and international emphasis in public relations education has therefore enriched the learning experience of all students.

Conclusion

Public relations educators face constant challenges in adapting to students who have diverse expectations and understandings of public relations theory and practice. This paper points to some creative and flexible approaches that are required to educate students from diverse cultures. If educators make a point of focusing on the cultural contribution of class members and develop a growing knowledge of respective cultures, then a *culture of learning* is developed around international, regional and local perspectives. The key components of a culture of learning are to;

- Establish an understanding of the cultural context of each cohort of students.
- Allow students to interpret their learning through the lens of other cultures represented in each cohort of students.
- Apply theory to the context of cultural understanding and interpretation of each cohort of students.

This paper included some examples of effective inter-cultural teaching practices but also emphasised that as each class is different each cohort of students presents a different challenge, requiring a different response. What is effective for one cohort of students may not be so for the next. In the same way that the educator/author realised that the crisis scenario was perceived in a different way to what the educator expected students need to be encouraged to check out, compare, consider another point of view and broaden their outlook of public relations theory and practice. The emphasis is on making the learning relevant to the students even though public relations may be limited or extended by the political, social, economic environment in which it is practised (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2001). Public relations practice and education in intercultural contexts can be effective when diversity is embraced and understood as enriching communication for varied audiences and publics and varied student groups.

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[i] Scales, expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem- solver-process facilitator, communication technician, four key roles of public relations practice.

[ii] The emphasis on the individual in the culture rather than on the team or group or on the collective view point.

[iii] Power distance - how tolerant society is about unequally distributed decision making, individualism in contrast to collectivism, Masculinity and femininity, uncertainty avoidance measures in relation to how well society tolerates ambiguity and long/short term-orientation measures about the willingness to consider traditions of the past and carry them into the future.