Reflections on e-learning in a Public Relations environment: an integrated communication approach

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Abstract

The report addresses the issue of how e-learning may be addressed in a public relations learning environment. It concentrates on blended learning strategies with the aim of contributing to innovative classroom practice, using action research as a guide.

Marshal McLuhan’s theory that the medium is the message has a powerful impact of technological change on the world and has shown us a new way to explain our world and society.

This report views online public relations as one of the critical elements of integrated communication.

Key words: Public relations, communication, blended learning, action research.
1. **Title**

**Reflections on e-learning in a Public Relations environment: an integrated communication approach**

‘Online Communication is no longer something that takes part separately or is restricted geographically, it has become mainstream, integrated and global’ (Barker 2004:97)

According to Beldrain et al., (2006) open and distance learning is growing worldwide particularly in the EU and the USA. In 40-60% of schools (in the USA) traditional courses also offer online courses and programmes. Growth in e-learning is at 25% per year.

In South Africa, clear policy support for the role of ICTs in enhancing education and in contributing towards broad post-apartheid reconstruction is evident in the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education, the 2001 National Plan for Higher Education, the 2003 Draft White Paper on e-Education 2003, and the 2004 ICT Charter. The intersections among the three levels of policies and related structures - international, national, state, higher education institution – suggests that the South African state and higher education institutions may be actively constructing globalisation as a discourse relevant to shaping the nature of broad post-apartheid change (Ravjee, 2007).

The changes in education from distance learning, to online learning and now to e-learning have made an enormous difference.

Globalisation is an inevitable force in the modern age of digital communication technology, economic deregulation and increased international contact in virtually all spheres of life. All spheres of society will be affected and challenged by globalization, including the communication management and public relations profession (Rensburg & Cant 2009:121).

According to Gertsman and Meyers (2001: 8), the internet offers organizations more communication vehicles and avenues, and also an extended dimension of opportunities, where contact can be made with the customer and other stakeholders. This puts pressure on the customer, who now has to empower himself, in this new communication technology age.

Figure 1. tracks traditional paradigms and the introduction of new online trends.

**Figure One: Traditional paradigms vs new online trends** (Rensburg and Cant 2009:176)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Traditional paradigms</strong></th>
<th><strong>New online trends</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual documents with only texts</td>
<td>Multifaceted documents with sound, pictures and videos integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad interest services to a wide variety of audiences</td>
<td>Special interest services aimed at a target market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multimedia capabilities, moving from CD-ROM</td>
<td>To more advanced methods the DVD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From normal desktop computers with dial-up connections</td>
<td>To laptop with wireless internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardcopy information</td>
<td>Internet libraries with data, the World Wide web, mailing lists and blog groups</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Rensburg and Cant (2009:176) state that the Internet has fuelled a new economic order that places attention on the use of the e-business models due to the continuous real-time change that is taking place.

So with the advent of new technologies affecting the business world, isn’t it time for our students to also go the e route? It has now become necessary for students to begin learning to utilize new technologies in order for their survival in the business world. I also believe that it is important for students to take charge and ‘learn by doing’. They need to move away from the idea of rote learning and to move on to initiating practices that will make learning more challenging and fun.

1. Context

This report concentrates on practical blended learning strategies with the aim of contributing to innovation in classroom practice in the public relations discipline.

Public Relations IV is one of the three major subjects that forms part of the B Tech: Public Relations Management Degree. One of the modules discussed in the syllabus of this subject is International/Global Public Relations, which delves into corporations that might be or are involved in international business operations including marketing, advertising and public relations. These operations have been made possible by new communication technologies, lowering of trade barriers, existence of worldwide financial markets, and growth of foreign competition.

Therefore, On-line public relations can be defined as “a process of creating and enhancing the positive image of an organisation’s products or services to target audiences who use the internet and online services in a strategic manner, which is consistent with the organisation’s overall communication programme” (Barker 2004:91).

There are a number of online public relations tools that are utilized by public relations practitioners. These include websites, e-mail, e-newsletters, media relations, list serves, discussion forums, bulletin boards, text messages (sms) and instant messaging and blogs.

2. Challenges

Public Relations four is one of three major subjects offered to BTech: Public Relations Management students. This is a demanding course which sees students registered for five subjects over a one year period. The course is offered on a full-time basis with lectures held weekly. Part-time registration is allowed, however due to a lack of staff to teach part-time classes, students have to attend lectures with full-time students. Public Relations four entails face to face discussions and seminars over a 50 minute duration (3 periods). Rigorous sessions are held and the format of each lecture entails formal lectures where I use power point and discussion to teach and get the message across. During seminars students present in small groups on syllabus related topics to the rest of their peers.

Some of the major challenges are that students do not do groundwork/reading or research prior to attending a lecture. They also do not feel free to add to discussions. There are a handful of students who lend to discussion time, and the rest rely on the lecturer. Duration of lectures are 50 minutes long and their concentration dwindles, by the end of a class. Lack of interest in group interaction is another issue, which puts stress on a group. Attendance is also
a problem and this result in work not being submitted on time. Part-time students hardly attend as distance is a major problem, and this puts additional pressure on me to repeat lectures for these students.

By offering such a practical and alternative means to learning it is hoped that the problems mentioned above will be addressed.

I am of the opinion that such an online course will allow interactivity in the following ways:

- flexibility to learn and discover new aspects of public relations
- an extension of knowledge, using a variety of new techniques
- a means to professional development
- allowing distance learning to take place
- and further interest in this course by undergraduate students (extending student numbers and throughput rates)

3. **Theory**

Marshal Mcluhan’s theory that the medium is the message has a powerful impact of technological change on the world and has showed us a new way to explain our world and society. Today, such McLuhan coinages as “sensory impact,” “the global village,” and “the medium is the message” have become part of the language (2008: [http://www.mcluhanmedia.com/m_mcl_manmessage.html](http://www.mcluhanmedia.com/m_mcl_manmessage.html)).

Global Communications has become so significant that the Marshal Mcluhan center on Global Communication has been set up to promote the use of communication technologies in the teaching-learning environment. As the world of communications undergo revolutionary change, our children need the insight and guidance of excellent teachers to help them to be prepared for the 21st Century challenges of the “information age.” (2008: [http://www.mcluhanmedia.com/m_mcl_centercomm.html](http://www.mcluhanmedia.com/m_mcl_centercomm.html)).

This report is based on the concepts of global public relations and global communication. The approach helps us as educators understand what Stuart and Jones (2004:86), believe that ‘in this integrated and global approach it is imperative for organizations to realize that the interactivity and the interconnectedness of the internet changes communication forever’.

Activities, investigations and problems, have always been at the heart of student involvement in meaningful learning contexts. Teachers provide such activities to enable students to interact with the learning environment, and to learn, apply, and practice newly acquired skills (Herrington, et al, 2004).

Activities have been defined by Brophy and Alleman (1991) as: “Anything students are expected to do, beyond getting input through reading or listening, in order to learn, practice, apply, evaluate, or in any other way respond to curricular content”

However, students have many styles of learning and adjust differently to traditional face-to-face teaching. Therefore, by using different teaching styles and ingenious teaching activities, opportunities for students to practice and apply their learning, will develop.
A complex and sustained activity can motivate students to learn. It can provide meaning and relevance to complex content, enable collaborative problem solving, justify the creation of polished products, and provide integrated assessment of achievement (Herrington, et al, 2004).

Herrington et al (2004) further argue that the value of authentic activity is not constrained to learning in real-life locations and practice, but that there are critical characteristics of authentic activities that can be incorporated into the design of Web based courses to enhance learning online.

A number of authors suggest that authentic activities should be ill defined so that students must find as well as solve the problems. Learners need to have opportunities to: explore a situation with all the complexity and uncertainty of the real world, have a role in determining the task and how it might be broken up into smaller tasks, select relevant information, and find solutions that suit their needs. Because authentic activities mirror real-world tasks, they require students to use teamwork, interpersonal skills, technology, decision-making, and other skills to complete the task successfully (Herrington, et al, 2004).

I believe this is true in the public relations environment. In our public relations management programme we have an innovative means of assessment, where we allow integration amongst the major subjects. We use a case study and add relevant questions which travels through each subject.

I agree with the three statements made by Myers (1993). Activities must be broad and allow interaction and collaboration. I will discuss these statements as they relate to the public relations environment.

Myers (1993) developed three criteria for measuring the authenticity of an activity:

1. The activity provides opportunities for the students to achieve something that they perceive as real or genuine;

   Real life scenarios are given to students in the traditional classroom and they are expected to discuss issues that are relevant to public relations. For example in the when the Political Public Relations module is discussed, students are put into groups and expected to discuss how this relates to the South African situation, for example the election process. The same may be done in the e-learning environment. During this time they will have access to more material and discussion can be made more meaningful and interesting.

2. The activity challenges, inspires, and empowers learners to take risks and exceed personal limitations; and

   In the e-learning environment students will want to use the discussion tool to their advantage. They will not be shy to share experiences.

3. The activity makes some difference in the lives of the learners.

   Students will ‘grow as they learn’, especially using a new means to learning. I think this will be a challenge to them at first, but later will become a novel means to learning.
In this report, it is anticipated that this authentic e-learning activity performed by public relations students will be an important element to the design of the future learning environment.

4. Methodology

Action research is used in real situations, since its primary focus is on solving real problems.

Figure Two: Simple Action Research Model

"Action research...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process (http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html#Toc26184651).

Action research is known by many other names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and contextual action research. Put simply, action research is "learning by doing" - a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again (O’Brien, 1998). Key attributes of action research that was utilized in the pilot activity is discussed in the following steps:
• **Plan**: This phase of the action research process sees the problem analysis and strategic plan being put into action. In this step I looked at the prospect of using education technology to enhance student engagement, interaction, assessment and feedback into my course.

• **Act**: In the action stage the strategic plan is implemented. The course is run as a traditional face to face encounter, however for the sake of this assessment; a pilot activity was undertaken with students from my B. Tech Public Relations class, more specifically using the International Relations module (see figure three).

• **Observe**: In this phase of the research process, the action is evaluated by appropriate methods and techniques. During the pilot activity I observed the situation, wherein students confidently used instructions to navigate the on-line classroom.

• **Reflect**: In this final stage, action researchers view the results of the evaluation, on both the action and research process. Once the pilot activity was carried out I was able to see where the gaps existed and was able to plan for the real on-line class, using suggestions from the pilot activity.

5. **Design**

6.1 **Vision**

I will ensure that more communication channels would be utilized to provide a platform for student-to-student interaction. In doing this I will improve on the classroom by providing automatically graded quizzes, on-line surveys, which will enhance the e-learning course by feedback from students on the teaching and learning process.

6.2 **Active Learning**

Collaboration and teamwork are vital for the e-learning process. Students would be able to learn together while still maintaining individual control over their own time, space, action and individuality, during their e-learning relationship. Although students will be involved in a social e-learning relationship they will still be able to work in a controlled environment and apply their learning experiences. The same concept as in the face-to-face seminar would apply to this online course. Group activity would be a necessity and students would be encouraged to draw material from various sources and bring it to discussion time in their online classroom. Here discussion (using the discussion tool) will take place allowing dialogue between the lecturer and group and eventually once discussion and confirmation has taken place the assignment (using the assignment tool) is submitted. Collaboration and interaction and the absence of dominance in the group, is necessary for such a project to be successful.

6.3 **Working Smart**

Working smart will allow less face-to-face interaction. This will give me ample time to design and make the e-learning environment interesting and user friendly. I will be able to include new interventions, such as on-line surveys, quizzes and try to add important downloads as far as using
on-line guest lectures and navigation through other sites, including corporate sector face book initiatives and other ideas to complement the theory that will make a difference to the course.

6.4 Blended learning

“Hybrid” (Cookson, 2002) and “blended” (Ginns and Ellis, 2007) modes of implementation, most often refers to learning technology integration into traditional on-campus education.

When I began this course it made me realize that it would be easy to use blended learning to deal with issues/problems amongst students in the public relations course. Although on-line learning may be the ideal way to go, Weaver (1996) warns that “eliminating direct contact in interpersonal communication almost has the effect of taking the personal out of interpersonal communication”. It is therefore necessary to use both face-to-face and on-line learning to interact with students.

I would use both methods of teaching, with face-to-face meetings once a term, or maybe even every three weeks, to allow further discussions on seminars (group presentations). Seminars and group presentations are a necessary assessment for the course. The activity will be located in the assignment tool and may be accessed by the group. Group composition will also be located in the online classroom, under the group manager tool. They will be allowed to discuss their group project privately, without meeting face-to-face.

Selected readings will also be available on-line, with links to useful sites found in the web links tool. Face to face discussion will allow discussion around problems that may be encountered on-line and for guest lectures which is a necessity for this course to merge theory with the practice of public relations.

Communication in the on-line classroom will enhance discussion with those students who generally feel shy, or afraid to ask questions and join discussion in a face-to-face classroom. This is a safe means to communication and will lend to collaboration amongst learners and between the learner and the lecturer.

My on-line classroom will be used further for the following:

- To access course material (subject Guidelines) via the syllabus
- To access guidelines and assessment criteria for all assessments
- Access to notes and power point slides
- Announcements on assessments and any other change that may occur
- Feedback on assessments
- Electronic submission of assessments
- Access to student progress. Progress may be tracked using the my grades tool
- Private discussions amongst students
- Collaboration in-terms of group work without having to meet face-to-face
- To access on-line quizzes/self tests to assist with exam planning
- Online Surveys to assess the students
- Access to Case Studies
- Self tests with instant feedback
- Practice tests on exam papers
- Access to the Media library to link course with different learning styles
- Access to Web links which may enhance the course content
- Access the calendar which will provide important course dates
• Access to the mail tool which will allow private communication and collaboration with peers and lecturer

7.1 Pilot Activity

The pilot activity was undertaken as a blended and action learning exercise with three B Tech Public Relations Management students (for whom the course was designed). Blended because we first discussed the assignment at an earlier stage and it was then set in the online classroom as an assignment. The illustrated figure three gives clear instructions to students in terms of navigating the on-line classroom.

Included in the Classroom under the learning modules link, were the following:

- Welcome
- Course Information
- An overview of International Public Relations
- Readings on the subject
- The study guide
- Tutorial One

Students were asked to navigate to the drop down menu of the overview of public relations and then to click on the power point link, to familiarize themselves on the topic of International public relations and which would enable them to answer the question that followed.

In the third task students were asked to navigate to the web links tab which would allow them to browse through further links on International Public Relations. Then they were asked to click on the assignment tab, read and type in their answers in the submission box and finally submit. This was a formative assessment to test their ability to use an on-line classroom and provide answers to an important current and relevant problem in South Africa.

In the fourth task students were asked to navigate to the discussion link. I asked them to let me have their thoughts on the process of navigating through the on-line classroom. Once the question was read, they were asked to click on create message, structure their answers and finally click on post. (See Figure four).

7.2 Relevance

7.3 Feedback

All three students were able to navigate easily using the instructions provided. They were confident and at ease while navigating and rarely needed any guidance from me. They were able to complete the assignment and post their responses with ease. On reflection students, found navigating through the classroom easy. They were concerned though, that students may be side-tracked and loose focus, however on the whole they were confident that such an innovation will make a difference. They thought that using such a tool as an interactive way of using technology to communicate with students was rather innovative. They found that having materials relating to the course on hand was useful. They believed that such a tool was convenient and practical.
Dear Student

Thank you for your assistance with this online course.

To begin go to:

- Internet explorer
- Enter http://edtech.dut.ac.za in address line
- Click on WebCT6
- Click on login
- Enter username and password
- You will then enter the blackboard learning system
- Click on Training 08 - Rampersad Renitha - Training 08 - Rampersad Renitha
- You will then enter my classroom, which welcomes you to PR4.

Figure Three: Instructions for Pilot Activity
First task

1. Click on Learning modules on your left hand side
2. Click on International Public Relations – Overview

Second Task

1. On you left you will see table of contents for International Public Relations – Overview
2. Click on International PR Outcomes
3. And click on International PR Powerpoint
4. Read through these, which will assist you in answering the question that follows.
Third Task

1. Close the learning modules link
2. You may also go to web links tab which will allow you to browse through further links on International Public Relations, should you so wish.
3. Click on Assignments
4. In the submission box, type in your answer.
5. Then click on submit.

Fourth Task

1. Click on discussion link
2. Click on thoughts on an on-line classroom for PR 1V
3. Then create message
4. Let me have your thoughts on this process
5. And finally Click Post

Thank you for your assistance.
Figure Four: Reflections on the on-line classroom

I found the online classroom easy to navigate and think it is a good idea as it enables students to have access to information without having to come on campus.

However, the only problem I foresee with this method of learning is students procrastinating and choosing to do other things instead of going through the study material.

Overall, I think this method of study is going to make learning that much easier and will benefit students who work as well as study.

I wish we had this system when I was in first year!!! What a pleasure!!!

Meghan Ranwick (200614035)

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the layout is easy to follow, it just takes some getting use to at the beginning but once mastered, becomes very user friendly. having access to the presentation at all times would make learning for the students better because you can go through it at your own leisure. it will save on paper and it would mean less filing work for students and back problems.

submitting of assignments would also be made alot easier for students because it would save money on printing.

I would just like to have a spell check application.

from

Mike 200600529
8. Reflection

8.1 Assumptions

When I first began designing this classroom, I thought it would be a nightmare for any student. However once the pilot activity was undertaken I was thrilled with the comments received and the ease of students navigating through the classroom. I also thought that two quick activities during the pilot activity would be sufficient. It was sufficient; however, I believe that had I included a quiz or some multiple choice questions, it would have made the experience even more interesting.

8.2 Future Adjustments

On reflecting on this paper I have come across certain issues that I believe will enhance online teaching:
- Motivating students and incentivising them to participate in this initiative
- Using collaborative efforts to get them to take advantage of these activities.
- Developing cost effective methods to online learning. Providing computer labs with internet connection, that will house 40/50 students.

8.3 Impact

One would never have thought that putting a course on-line would be so challenging and exciting at the same time. Having learnt how to design this course has taught me that ‘patience is a virtue’ and that nothing is impossible. The comments I received from my pilot study was so encouraging that I know that this on-line course would be a big plus for our department and the DUT. Having had all four lecturers from the B Tech programme attend this course, it becomes clear that we may launch the on-line course in the near future.

The role played by DUT in encouraging this transition is necessary. It is now up to the University to ensure that this change takes place and this can only be done by investigating the opportunities, challenges and needs that exist to make this venture a success.

8.4 Lessons Learnt

I have learnt that once you begin a new venture, let nothing get in your way. I always put my own workload first and as a result was very disappointed when I was not able to attend lectures and complete tasks on time. I learnt how important it was to attend face-to-face lectures and in so doing have come to understand that it is going to be very important to guide students through the introductory phase of this course. This has been an invaluable, professionally enhancing experience and the course must be put into practice as soon as possible.

Conclusion

This paper viewed online public relations as one of the critical elements of integrated communication. We have learnt how important communication is in using technology in the corporate sector and how important communication is for this e-learning environment.

As Herrington, et al, (2004) so nicely put it, one theme which has emerged strongly from a number of different sources in our research is the nature of authenticity, and how “authentic” environments are often the creation of the teachers’, authors’, and instructional designers’ imaginations, and are thus inevitably someone’s view of what is authentic.

Although, Petraglia (1998), has been critical of this shortcoming, calling it “the real world on a short leash”. I am inclined to believe that once our course has been fully designed and structured and put onto the ‘map’ it will create a vast significance for authentic on-line activities in public relations domain.

The pilot activity has initiated a need to develop this course further and to have it implemented as soon as possible.
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