



Research Done Right: A Reflection of the Impact of Mentorship and Experiential Learning via the Public Relations Research Course

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In public relations, practitioners and clients alike always think that strategy is the most important part of the campaign planning process, but strategy is nothing without good research. According to Stacks (2011), research is essential to every public relations campaign, and without it public relations practitioners are just taking “educated guesses” about what the problem is and the best means for solving the determined problem (p. 6). Lack of research leaves practitioners with no way of assessing what needs to be accomplished or accurately evaluating the effectiveness of a campaign. While the importance of research is often understood in academia, practitioners admit that they do not always see the value in it, and that rushing through the research phase or eliminating it altogether is often one of the easiest and most common ways to save time and money (Stacks & Michaelson, 2010). However, public relations research is essential for transitioning the field from a technical skill to a management function within organizations (Brunner, 2003). Without a research plan, practitioners cannot accurately monitor, track, measure, or evaluate their public relations programs. Stacks (2011) writes, “Think of research (and data) as part of a continuous feedback/feedforward function: research planning and accurate data lead to valid assessments and analyses of public opinion, program effectiveness, and in the end may help to predict behavioral outcomes” (p. 4). With this being said, research is an important component in any undergraduate public relations curriculum in order for future practitioners to understand its significance and be prepared for the next step in their lives.

While research is one of the most important public relations components for undergraduate students to understand, it is also one of the hardest for them to grasp. In order to make it more digestible, a focus on both mentorship and class structure is essential. Strong mentorship has been shown to lead to rewards such as deeper personal learning, stress management, reciprocal mentoring, and greater pay satisfaction (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Schipani, Dworking, Kwolek-Folland, & Maurer, 2009). Strong mentoring in public relations in particular has helped students think more deeply about their desired career paths, provided them more context to the job market, validated and empowered them toward leadership roles, and increased their networks of professionals and mentors (Briones & Janoske, 2013; Briones, Janoske, & Paquette, 2013; Pompper & Adams, 2006). Thus, through solid mentoring by public relations educators, students may feel more comfortable learning an area that does not come as easily to them, such as research. In addition, courses that focus on experiential/service-learning can allow public relations students to practice the concepts of research in a structured way, which helps build their skills at their own pace without the added pressure of the public relations work environment. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate the utility of mentoring and experiential

learning by exploring the evolution of the public relations research course through the lens of these theoretical areas, and to determine whether or not it can help students better understand the research process.

Literature Review

Mentoring Defined

According to Kram (1988), mentoring is defined as an “interpersonal exchange between an experienced senior colleague (mentor) and a less experienced junior colleague (protégé) in which the mentor provides the protégé with career functions related to career advancement and psychosocial functions related to personal development” (p. 727). The first function, career advancement and development, can encompass a number of career-oriented roles for the mentor, including sponsorship, coaching, protection, exposure to higher power in the organization, and challenging work assignments (Kram, 1985). In this function, the mentor’s priority is setting career goals with the mentee, and does not necessarily have to include any type of emotional interpersonal relationship (Mullen, 2006). This type of mentoring is most frequently seen in formal mentoring programs, where mentor and protégé are systematically paired for an established amount of time with structures in place for making contact (Phillips-Jones, 1983; Ragins, Cotton & Miller, 2000).

The second function, psychosocial support, leans toward the more emotional interpersonal relationship where the mentor offers support, role modeling, friendship, and boosts of confidence to the mentee. Role modeling is particularly useful because it offers a positive example for the mentee, while allowing the mentee to feel comfortable and open to discussing issues and information. Furthermore, this type of support could encourage mentees to experiment with new behaviors and accept more challenging training opportunities when bolstered by encouragement, self-esteem, and confidence from their mentors (Noe, 1988; Tharenou, Latimer, & Conroy, 1994).

Extant research has explored the positive characteristics of mentoring relationships, namely an open communication system, and a clear standard of expectations, as well as setting clear goals, establishing trust, caring for each other, allowing for mistakes, participating in training programs willingly, and allowing for flexibility (Allen & Poteet, 1999). Successful mentors in particular were also found to embody traits such as good listening skills, patience, knowledge of the industry/expertise, ability to understand others, honesty, genuine interest, being people-oriented, being self-reflexive, flexibility, and having a structured vision (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Zimpher & Rieger, 2001), which in turn, can result in benefits such as the satisfaction of helping with the development of the protégé and self-rejuvenation (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). For the protégé, mentoring can lead to rewards such as pay satisfaction, personal learning, stress management, and the opportunity to mentor their own protégés in the future (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Schipani et al., 2009). However, along with benefits come potential risks that may stem from a mentoring relationship, including the high time demands and the risk of exploitation on the part of either the mentor or the mentee (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). Negative experiences could also emerge from a result of a dyad mismatch, lack of mentor expertise, and mentor neglect and/or manipulation (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000).

Mentoring in Public Relations

As stated in the rationale behind this paper, there has been little exploration on the impact of mentoring in the field of public relations, and even less in terms of mentoring public relations research. With that said, there have been several studies that helped shape the context surrounding this phenomenon that can add some much needed insight on the opportunities and challenges surrounding mentoring in this field.

In regards to more traditional mentoring relationships, young public relations professionals more

greatly appreciated less tangible rewards from their mentors in the practice, as it demonstrated commitment to their relationship (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012). Mentees were more likely to be satisfied with their mentoring relationships if they believed their mentors were emotionally invested, which was shown through being caring and insightful, helping with the success of the mentee, recognizing good work, but also trusting the mentee with more challenging work to provide more professional development opportunities (Daugherty, 2011; Gallicano et al., 2012). However, this need for a more personal bond and emotional connection has been found to be more dominant with female practitioners and same-sex relationships (Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, & Real, 1995), though Pompper and Adams (2006) argue that both male and female practitioners need to provide both career and psychosocial support to all protégés.

Another related phenomenon that has emerged in public relations is the concept of reverse mentoring, where students mentor their peers, such as in the context of a fully student-run public relations firm (Swanson, 2011). Greengard (2002) claimed that this type of mentoring is key, as it can help less experienced practitioners develop useful skillsets for the profession. In addition, this type of mentoring also allows for more managerial/leadership roles among more experienced practitioners while helping move the client toward achieving their desired goals and outcomes. In a similar vein, Pompper and Adams (2006) found that a positive outcome of mentoring among public relations practitioners is giving mentors the sense of “paying it forward” by reciprocating their experience to others, lending itself to a sustainable cycle of networking and resources among the public relations community.

More recently, researchers have explored mentoring within the social media context, a relatively new and fast-growing channel of communication among public relations practitioners (Briones & Janoske, 2013; Briones, Janoske, & Paquette, 2013). For professional mentors in particular, social media can be used as a way to model appropriate uses of the tools in the workplace, by way of sharing their own experiences, challenges, and lessons learned that may serve useful in dealing with future client and audience interactions (Briones, Janoske, & Paquette, 2013). Interviews with practitioners found that the only way to move toward this is by having an open conversation up front with the mentee and setting specific expectations on how social media should be used, in order to avoid miscommunication and even abuse within the mentoring relationship (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Briones, Janoske, & Paquette, 2013).

For public relations faculty in particular, social media does not only provide another outlet to communicate and mentor their students (especially ones who have moved on and are no longer in the immediate geographic area), but they can also serve as a way for the educators themselves to maintain a pulse on the industry, communicate with professionals, and keep their teaching content relevant for their students (Briones & Janoske, 2013). Furthermore, in spite of potential resistance from university administrators, other faculty, and students to using social media in teaching/mentoring, Briones and Janoske (2013) found that supplementing class time with social-mediated relationships strengthened bonds, provided more opportunities for discussion and advice surrounding the PR job market, and kept the professor aware of student needs on a more consistent and ongoing basis.

Experiential Learning

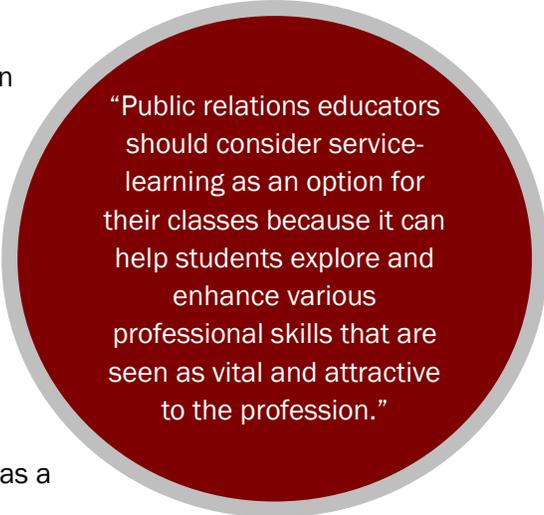
Kolb (1984) developed experiential learning theory (ELT) as an alternate mode of acquiring knowledge through integrating thought and experience in a truly cyclical and transformative fashion (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). As Kolb (1984) contended, “Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41), and is accomplished through a process of concrete experiences, comprehension, reflective observation, and action. What makes this approach so compelling to educators is that it can be applied to a variety of different learning environments and

contexts, and is one viable route toward helping students understand theories and abstract concepts in a more concrete, applied manner. Additionally, due to its truly cyclical format, students can enter the process from a variety of different starting points, creating a more organic and transformative learning experience where they can support and resolve issues collaboratively from their different learning styles (Cheney, 2001; Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The applied nature of the public relations profession lends nicely to the concept of experiential learning, especially in terms of deducing broader theories and concepts to more concrete skills that students can practice in the classroom (e.g., Anderson & Swenson, 2013; Fraustino, Briones, & Janoske, 2015; Todd, 2009; Wilson, 2012). In an effort to connect online teaching with experiential learning, Fraustino, Briones, and Janoske (2015) explored the effectiveness of hosting Twitter chats across three different campuses in order to engage students in discussions based on individual assignments surrounding the same topics. Not only did the cross-institutional Twitter chats create more networking opportunities for the students, but it also exposed them to new viewpoints and allowed them to cycle through Kolb and Kolb's (2005) proposed learning cycle in an innovative and fun way.

Service-Learning

One specific type of experiential learning that incorporates an additional focus on civic engagement is service-learning, which Pelco, Ball, and Lockeman (2014) define as a “credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and allows them to reflect on the activity to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 52). In other words, service-learning is another useful teaching approach within the experiential learning model that not only enables students to actively strategize toward solving real-world problems, but also benefits community-based organizations as a result of that application and reflection (Waldner, 2015).



“Public relations educators should consider service-learning as an option for their classes because it can help students explore and enhance various professional skills that are seen as vital and attractive to the profession.”

Several positive outcomes have emerged in research focused on assessing service-learning courses such as enhanced personal efficacy and leadership skills (Wang, 2000), leading toward students' development of civic identity and commitment to servicing the community (Ash, Claytron, & Atkinson, 2005; Harkay & Hartley, 2010). One study in particular argued that service-learning courses help improve students' academic performance overall outside of that particular course (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011).

Public relations educators should consider service-learning as an option for their classes because it can help students explore and enhance various professional skills that are seen as vital and attractive to the profession, providing more satisfying and realistic work experiences post-graduation (Bennett, Henson, & Drane, 2003; Simons & Cleary, 2006; Pelco, Ball & Lockeman, 2014). In fact, Wilson's (2012) exploration of learning for PR students via client-based projects led to positive outcomes such as stronger critical thinking and problem solving proficiencies. Thus, the service component of the course and the course learning goals need to be closely aligned, with ample opportunities for discussion and reflection within the classroom to ensure that their comprehension of course content ties back to the service-learning component in a thoughtful and meaningful way (University of Massachusetts at Amherst Civic Engagement and Service-Learning, 2013).

Course Overview

The Public Relations Research course at the researchers' institution, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), focuses on reviewing recent developments in public relations research; understanding the contexts and uses of research in public relations; and introducing students to how to use research skills to facilitate public relations practice and program evaluation. The course imparts a managerial perspective, rather than a technical skills approach, to the use of a wide range of research methods.

Students begin the semester with an extensive orientation to the types of research essential at various stages of communication planning, with a focus on four main types of public relations research throughout the semester: surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and content analysis. The class focuses on discussing and analyzing each of these types of research with an emphasis on the crucial role of research to develop an informed strategy, monitor communication programs, and to evaluate overall public relations campaign effectiveness. Students then work in teams throughout the remainder of the semester to develop these research skills through practice.

The course has traditionally been structured as a service-learning course because real client experience allows the students to both apply the research methods to public relations practice as well as provide insights for local business development. Service-learning at VCU is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets community-identified needs. This collaborative teaching and learning strategy is designed to promote and encourage course content, personal growth, and civic engagement. Typically, a service-learning course requires a minimum of 20 hours of service with selected nonprofit and community-based organizations or schools. For the Public Relations Research course service, student teams work with a local, non-profit community partner ("client") to provide public relations research services. Based on the community partner's needs, students determine an overarching research goal, questions, and target audiences. They then conduct surveys, interviews, focus groups, and a content analysis to help answer the research questions. The final project consists of each student team developing a public relations research report for the client and presenting the research-based insights to the client, which are ideally utilized by the client to communicate with its key publics in order to achieve its long-term goals.

Method

Critical reflection involves an overall process of learning from experience in order to improve practice (Fook & Gardner, 2007). The overarching goal of this paper was to focus on better understanding the role of mentoring and experiential learning in the public relations research classroom, while determining whether or not these theories can help students better understand the research process. Thus, we felt that integrating critical reflection from students, clients, and teaching assistants (TAs) with our own experiences as instructors was an appropriate approach for determining benefits and challenges of and possible solutions for improving the public relations research learning experience.

In order to receive a range of opinions, we reached out to 15 previous students, 4 previous clients, and 1 previous TA and asked them to voluntarily complete an email questionnaire (see Appendix) that was completed on the participants' own time and emailed back. The students, clients, and TAs participated in one of four different PR Research courses taught by one of two different instructors. Participants were asked to reflect back on the pros and cons of the research course, their experience with the service-learning aspect of the course, and their feelings on receiving mentorship throughout the course. We received responses from nine former students, four former clients, and two TAs. The overall response rate was 75%.

The data were coded through an inductive approach in order to identify preliminary commonalities. Inductive reasoning is based on learning from experience, and involves observing patterns, resemblances, and regularities in experience in order to reach conclusions (Dudovskiy, 2016). Responses were received via email and we organized them by responder type and question. Both researchers separately analyzed the data for commonalities, which led to uncovering key themes, including experiential learning outcomes and service learning outcomes in the context of mentoring outcomes. To ensure the data's consistency and dependability (Merriam, 2009), the researchers frequently met in person and spoke over the phone to discuss ongoing analysis, including identifying concepts, discussing dimensions of the concepts and potential alternative explanations, and agreeing upon themes and conclusions from these data. Their responses, along with our own reflections as instructors, will be detailed further via the emergent themes below.

Results

Research and Mentoring

In regards to the role active mentoring played in the PR Research course, the reflections led to several major themes: (1) Learning research techniques from knowledgeable instructors; (2) Dealing with challenges such as lack of time to fully comprehend heavy content with an oversaturation of information; (3) Understanding the importance of peer mentoring; (4) Realizing the importance of research in PR; (5) Offering practical, real-world application to students; and (6) Building confidence to prepare students for future classes, and ultimately, the job market. As previously stated, the role of mentoring within these themes will also be discussed in order to explore their connection.

First, students and clients involved with the PR Research course felt comfortable asking questions because they believed they were in very capable hands. As one client mentioned, "The teacher of the class is first class and extremely knowledgeable about current social media trends and research data gathering." Another student connected the professor's expertise in research to the mentoring received throughout the semester: "I do feel as though I received mentorship in the class. Being that my professor specialized in research was a big plus. She really knew what she was talking about during all facets of our project, and was always more than happy to give guidance."

With that said, students felt challenged by the sheer volume of content, and wished it could be scaled down a bit to retain more meaningful information about fewer topics:

Public relations research is a lengthy process and an involved topic; there is a lot to explain and apply in order to make discoveries. I think that because the course was so saturated with information, it was difficult to retain all of it. If we had had more time to slow down the pace of each lesson, there would have been less confusion all around.

A graduate student TA agreed with this notion, stating, "It's just the nature of most classes/courses – there's never enough time to spend on everything because almost everything is important!"

To aid with these challenges, students looked to mentoring, not just from their professor but also from their peers. This created a great sense of community within the course, as described by one student: "Overall, the PR Research course comes with many benefits, especially with service learning tied into it. Courses like this create a sense of community among students and I think that's important when you go to a school as big as VCU."

Another student agreed, and described how the connections made seemed more meaningful compared to other courses:

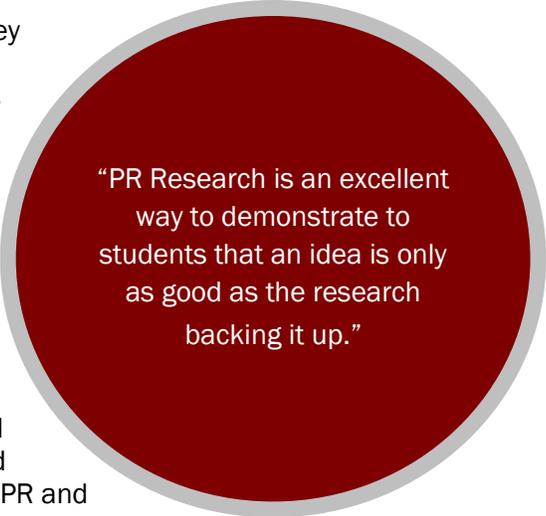
PR Research as a service-learning course really allows students and their professors to connect on a deeper level. With that being said, I, personally, feel like I received mentorship in the class—not just from my professor, but from my peers, as well. Because of the

transparency of the class, were able to have meaningful discussions that taught me a lot about other people's views on important matters. Students were also much more willing to help one another professionally, and even personally. I feel more knowledgeable after taking this course.

All in all, students walked away from the course feeling like they knew why research is so important in PR, and how it can be effective and practical when applied to their future careers. As stated by one student: "Although we all have lots of ideas for campaigns, promotions, PR Research is an excellent way to demonstrate to students that an idea is only as good as the research backing it up."

Furthermore, many students were wary of the PR Research course, not really knowing what to expect, though it seemed like students were pleasantly surprised based on this one student's reflection:

When I signed up for PR Research I wasn't very excited (because it had the word research in it and that scared me!) but I learned that research is a really cool part of PR and I actually enjoy it. Learning about clients is really important when you represent them and when you run a campaign. I found that research is an aspect that I enjoy a lot, which I wasn't expecting honestly!



"PR Research is an excellent way to demonstrate to students that an idea is only as good as the research backing it up."

One of the biggest takeaways in regards to students realizing PR research's value is the fact that the skills learned in the course are practical, useful, and can easily be applied in numerous real-world contexts:

We, as students learn many techniques on how to correctly and accurately process information. We learned how to interview correctly and most importantly I learned the right language to use during an interview. I learned how to be fair and not biased and how to not influence an answer by the wording of the questions. The most important thing about the class was that I learned techniques that I will actually have to use as a PR professional.

As stated by another student, taking the PR research class was helpful in making progress toward a successful PR career through applied, meaningful work:

Before entering this class, I had never been responsible for conducting research in the field of communications. It was an important step in my undergraduate career. During the course of the semester, we learned from lectures about the correct research methods and then practiced their application for an actual client; our work had meaning. Surveys, informational interviews, and coding all eventually guided us to successful outcomes, which we were able to pass on to [our course client].

Finally, one student in particular felt equipped to apply their learning in future courses in the PR sequence:

After I finished the course, I confidently proceeded to other courses in which I felt ready to advise/offer consultation to clients. Without the PR Research instruction, I would not be able to analyze a client's public relations/marketing efforts and be able to make recommendations as proficiently as I can now.

Simultaneously, this method also provided a unique mentoring opportunity for professors to train students in the very same research methods they were trained in as a way of "paying it forward" to

the mentors they ascribe their success to in their own career. By serving as a model for students, the professors can empower their students to grasp these difficult, often abstract concepts and feel fulfilled in helping them reach their “aha!” moments. This encouragement toward understanding an important area such as PR Research is so vital in moving students forward in their coursework and career, and has shown to make such a difference in building the confidence of students.

Service-Learning Outcomes

In regards to service-learning outcomes related to the PR Research course, both students and clients reflected on the different benefits and challenges associated with the service-learning component. The major themes that emerged included: (1) Assisting community partners with research gaps; (2) Contending with client communication issues; and (3) Exposing students to true community engagement via the service-learning course. Once again these themes will be situated within the context of mentoring, and how these two areas converge when it comes to teaching the PR Research course.

For one student, the service-learning component of the class provided the hands-on experiential learning piece that was very attractive, but it also allowed him to help address a community-need: “I think it [service-learning] provides students with real world experience and it also prepares them for life after college. It makes me feel good as a student knowing that my work for a client could make a real difference and could change the course of their future.”

From the client’s point of view, the integration of research with service-learning was very valuable to them in terms of meeting their internal goals. As one client stated, “We had a great time working with the students and they were able to compile research that we as an organization would not have the time to do. The information was vital to helping us secure future grants and to test our business model.” Thus, the clients were really grateful for student input that can help them achieve their future goals, which depicts a reverse mentoring role that may occur between PR professionals and clients, or in this case, a group of PR students and a client for a service-learning course.

Despite these benefits, the students did face some challenges in regards to this model that mostly revolved around communication issues in trying to maintain contact with the client. Because it is a service-learning designated course, the majority of the course clients were nonprofit organizations who are spread thin as is and oftentimes were difficult to track down when a student had a question or needed clarification on information. As relayed by one student:

One specific con that comes to mind for me was the lack of communication with our client. Understanding that they are very busy, I wasn't expecting a ton of communication but sometimes it felt like we were just guessing as to what their priorities were instead of hearing it from them. If I could change anything from the class it would be to somehow get the client involved for more than two days out of the entire semester. Feedback on how we're coming along would've been beneficial in producing the highest quality of research that is the most useful to them.

Experiencing that challenge, however, allowed students to be exposed to true community-engaged work, which can be difficult to coordinate. Since we work to maintain our own community partnerships for research and service purposes, we were able to step in and provide much needed insight and guidance to help increase mutual understanding and alleviate frustrations with course clients. The bottom line is that students recognized the immense value of this work, and how this experience enhanced skills that they can harness outside of the classroom. As one student contended:

I really enjoy the service-learning aspect of the course because it allows students to gain hands-on experience. Service-learning courses literally follow VCU’s slogan “Make It

Real.” We don’t just get a grade out of it at the end of the semester. Instead, students who take service-learning courses broaden their perspectives of societal issues; improve their leadership and communication skills; and act on their values and passions.

A graduate student TA expanded on this notion, stating:

The opportunity for students to not only learn about PR research but to actually apply what they learned to assist a real-life organization that serves those in need was rewarding for myself as the TA and the undergraduates. This allowed them to see that PR research can be used for good and also enabled them to obtain experience that they can use to advance their educational and professional career trajectory.

This comment was especially useful for us as instructors, who not only mentored the undergraduate students throughout this process, but also served as a mentor for graduate student TAs such as this one in order to depict how true community-engaged research via service-learning can occur within the PR classroom. Thus, through this interesting “ripple effect” of mentoring, we were not only able to help the undergraduate students understand the PR research process (a major learning outcome of the course), but a unique opportunity was presented for us to model positive mentoring relationships in the classroom. This was mostly demonstrated through our interactions with both the graduate TAs and undergraduate students, as well as through providing a space for the students to do so within their client-based projects.

A final exciting outcome of the PR Research course was extending relationships between clients and students beyond the course. In many cases, the most impressive students within the course were recruited to serve as communication interns for the course client following the completion of course, which not only allowed the students to deepen their understanding and skills related to PR and research, but it also allowed for the client to trust the student/intern to carry out the recommendations made by the students who were enrolled in the course. In a related vein, students often realized their passion for research through their experience in the course and talked to their professors about additional opportunities such as conducting research for a nonprofit, or applying to graduate school.

Possible Solutions and Future Directions

Based on a review of the literature and reflection from students, clients, and TAs, it is clear that teaching public relations research is both beneficial and challenging. Finding the balance between providing the necessary content to prepare students for the industry, while not oversaturating them with information is essential. Additionally, the information provided throughout the course appears to be useful, but it is also very difficult to digest the information because the concepts are new and foreign to most students. Lastly, it is clear from the reflections that the experiential learning aspect of the course is a highlight because students and clients alike see the benefit in hands-on application; However, time is limited for everyone involved, which makes providing the best product for clients harder. Thus, mentoring at all levels, from the instructor to the TAs to the students to the clients themselves, is key in order to address these challenges to aid with comprehension of research concepts and to ensure the best deliverable possible is presented to community partners. As illustrated by this particular case example, we observed that a course such as PR Research was conducive to mentoring due to the fact that they could work on being accountable to not just the client, but to each other in terms of grasping course content that many of the students have yet to see before.

However, due to the challenges addressed we are in the process of revising the public relations research course at VCU to better meet student needs. With benefits such as learning essential research methods and building confidence for future classes and the professional world, but

challenges such as lack of time, oversaturation of information, and balancing student/client needs, we determined that there should be less of a focus on service-learning and more of a focus on delving into the research methods themselves. The reasoning for this revised approach is to give students more time to perfect the valuable research methods needed for the industry without sacrificing important content or hands-on application of the methods that can in turn impact the course client. Additionally, by not feeling pressured to produce materials that are “client-ready,” students can take more time to assist each other through methods such as team building and cross-mentorship. Therefore, moving forward we will be eliminating the service-learning component of the class which will allow more time to review and practice each of the methods and to focus on building stronger relationships within the classroom. In this particular case example the mentoring that occurred was more of an organic process; However, future courses could incorporate mentoring as a more structured component of the curriculum through activities such as scheduled peer review, using a “buddy system” when working on assignments, or providing opportunities for students to give each other thoughtful, constructive feedback.

With this being said, we strongly believe from both the literature and reflections that service-learning is an essential part of any public relations curriculum, and we fully intend to make this a large part of the capstone course, Public Relations Campaigns, where students utilize the skills they develop in the public relations research course, as well as other courses in the curriculum, to develop a campaign (from formative research through strategy, tactics and evaluative research) for a non-profit client. Due to the fact that it is their final public relations course, students should at this point feel more comfortable serving a reverse mentoring role for their clients, and should feel more confident in taking leadership roles that allow them to mentor their peers and work alongside instructors to develop strategic communication plans. Thus, we have decided that although mentoring relationships can certainly emerge from any undergraduate public relations course, the PR Campaigns course may be more suitable for the multi-dimensional, deeply intertwined mentoring relationships that more appropriately simulate the real-world interactions students are more likely to experience in the work place post-graduation.

Conclusion

By reflecting on VCU’s Public Relations Research course, we determined that there are unique challenges associated with teaching research methods within the service-learning framework in order to provide mentoring opportunities for all parties involved. Although the benefits of this approach were in many ways influential for the students, the course clients, and the professors, the concerns surrounding the comprehension of concepts within the research process in general may be an issue that can be addressed via alternative course format options. Although this may seem disappointing, especially for community organizations that can benefit from service-learning opportunities, all hope is not lost because what will remain is the rich mentoring component that was stated in this research to be valuable for the students and the professors, and the experiential-learning component that provides skills useful for students moving forward in their future PR coursework, internships, and future careers, which is the ultimate goal no matter what course you are teaching.

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Appendix
Survey Questionnaires

Student

1. What were the overall pros/cons of the research class?
2. What are your opinions on the service-learning aspect of the class?
3. Do you feel like you received mentorship in this class? If yes, how?
4. Any other thoughts/opinions to share?

Teacher Assistant

1. What were the pros/cons of the research class?
2. What are your opinions on the service-learning aspect of the class?
3. Do you feel like you mentored the undergraduates in the class? If yes, how?
4. Any other thoughts/opinions to share?

Community Partner (Client)

1. What were the pros/cons of the research class?
2. How would you describe your experience working with the students?
3. What are your thoughts on the organization of the class?
4. Would you recommend this class to another community partner?
5. Any other thoughts/opinions to share?