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Teaching Public Relations to Students with a Confucian Cultural Background

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Abstract

This paper explores how the Confucian cultural background of students influences their perceptions of and reaction to the dominant public relations curriculum from the 'West'. Using focus groups of Asian students, three heuristics that affect the students' affinity to learn public relations are identified. Instructors working with students from a Confucian cultural background are advised to incorporate these heuristics when planning their curriculum.

Keywords: Teaching, Public Relations, Intercultural Relations

Teaching Public Relations to Students with a Confucian Cultural Background.

Globalization has led to the emergence of the Asian economies. Over the last 4 decades, they have increased their output tremendously while the scope of their business operations has expanded and now includes the management of multiple external relations. Today, large Asian businesses operate on the principles that: a) they need to compete for the attention of customers, b) they are accountable for the quality of their products and, c) the public extends this accountability to all aspects of their business, including workplace conditions and service quality. These principles have also gained traction because of the simultaneous rise in the average level of education in Asian societies, and the increased access to information both from a technological and a cognitive standpoint.

Not surprisingly, these operating principles have led to public relations becoming an increasingly important business function in the Asian 'tiger economies', one that is attracting more managerial resources, attention and workforce entrants each year. Tertiary institutions in many 'Asian tiger' countries have begun to incorporate public relations into their undergraduate social science and/or business curricula. While there are very few graduate programmes in corporate communication in Asian Universities, most programmes in mass communication or business administration include at least one course on public relations or public affairs. Additionally, courses in public opinion or persuasive communication are sometimes seen to provide public relations knowledge.

Given the comparative recency of public relations as a business function in Asian economies, and the paradigmatic dominance of 'Western' concepts in academia, these courses, while taught in Asian Universities to an Asian student population, are often based on Western curriculum design standards (e.g. Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006, 2012), teaching materials and textbooks. Much has been written about the effects of cultural backgrounds on business interactions (Hofstede, 2005; Hall, 1976; House *et al.*, 2004), on public relations (Gupta & Bartlett, 2007) as well as on education as a systemic purpose and a personal experience (De Bary, 1984, 2007). No data yet exists though, about how a learner's cultural background (whether it is an overt meta-model or merely a loose set of worldviews) frames and affects teaching of public relations and its hitherto mostly Western pedagogical origins. The primary goal of this study is therefore to explore how Asian students' cultural identity affects their affinity to learn public relations. It also aims to show how affinity (or the lack of it) can be integrated into the planning of a PR curriculum.

Methodology

The study faced a methodological challenge brought about by the fact that most Asian students are unlikely to point out any cultural distance between themselves and the course content, especially if doing so would give the impression that they were distancing themselves from - or even criticizing - their course instructors. Thus, we asked the students to reflect upon the differences between themselves and their fellow 'Western' students in the public relations course. The research question of this paper was:

How do Asian students demarcate their cultural identity from 'the West' when learning public relations?

Focus group interviews were conducted with undergraduate Asian students after they had completed an introductory or advanced public relations course with students from Europe, the Americas, Australia or New Zealand. Each course employed a case-based, participant-centred pedagogy, where students interacted very regularly with each other in project groups as well as in plenary sessions. The courses and focus groups took place in tertiary institutions where participants were either exchange students (alongside 'Western' full-time students) or were enrolled full-time (alongside 'Western' exchange students). English was the language of instruction in all courses.

The participants were between 21 and 27 years of age and came from China, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea. The focus groups were conducted twice annually between 2005 and 2011, and once again in 2012. They took place in Germany (International School of Management), New Zealand (Unitec), Singapore (Singapore Management University) and Taiwan (National Taiwan University of Science and Technology). Importantly, the participants in the focus group were – with the exception of Asian students at Unitec- at least as proficient in English as their 'Western' counterparts (at ISM, Germany and NTUST, Taiwan) or spoke English as a native language (at SMU, Singapore).

Six to nine Asian students were recruited for each focus group for what was termed 'informal course feedback' after the final course grades had been released to the students. Participants' recruitment was a self-selection process, but focus groups reflected a range of performance scores, as well as both genders. After providing general course feedback, the students were asked to comment on the following question: "How did you experience the collaboration with the exchange students from [country names] in this course?" (if the focus group participants were in their home University), or "How did you experience the collaboration with the students of [University name] in this course?" (if the focus group participants were exchange students). Participants were encouraged to give examples, elaborate on their observations, and – particularly when they observed differences – suggest underlying causes. Minutes of the each focus group were taken by the course's teaching assistant for later evaluation.

Results

Three themes were surfaced from the comments of the focus group participants on their interactions with 'Western' students and their view of the underlying causes of these perceived differences. These themes emerged unprompted in almost all the focus groups, and were quickly agreed upon whenever they were raised by a participant. They appeared to serve as quick, easily understood demarcations of the participants' cultural identities and demonstrated how they stood apart from the 'West' with regard to learning public relations. We consequently proposed to label them 'demarcation heuristics'.

1. "PR is less important to us than to Western students". Public relations as a profession is often held in low esteem by Asian students. Unlike 'Western' students, the focus group participants drew a sharp line between corporate behaviour and communication, or between action and words, with the latter being less important to them than the former. The paradigm of a public relation curriculum – that all messages are part of the symbolic inter-action of organisations (Zorn, 2002) – seemed inherently 'Western' to them. Instead, the focus group participants agreed that "actions speak louder than words" and "the packaging isn't as important as the content" to them as to the 'Western' students.
2. "We're not as good at communicating as Western students". The Asian students seemed to display a different awareness of their skills (Holmes, 2004). Unlike 'Western' students, who rarely doubt their technical communication skills, the focus group participants often expressed relative ineptitude at crafting messages for the general public, and even more so at verbally conveying messages in public, in spite of their comparable English proficiency. The Asian students expressed that their 'Western' peers were naturally better equipped at talking, but some also derided them as "NATO – no action talk only". They also pointed out that the industry's most vocal practitioners and the most media savvy CEOs all seemed to have a 'Western' cultural background that was often far removed from their own.

3. “The Western case-studies are simplistic”. Although American and European case studies dominate tertiary teaching, the focus group participants did not criticise this regional bias. Instead, they questioned the cause-and-effect style of narrative that is frequently adopted. Most case-studies revolve around key personae and their efforts to overcome strategic and operational obstacles. Asian students frequently remarked that companies are rarely “one-man-shows” (“It’s not like in Hollywood”).

Analysis

All focus group participants were socio-culturally from what the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004) calls ‘Confucian societies’. They were highly self-aware of their Confucian upbringing, frequently referring to it in their attempts to meta-analyse the focus group’s conversations and two of their three demarcation heuristics. We hence employ the Confucian cultural background as an analytical framework.

Confucianism is a normative model of society based on the understanding that each individual’s behaviour is expected to contribute ultimately to the establishment of an ideal society. Although Confucianism has been changed by millennia of human experience in increasingly complex societies, each with their own collective identities, it has maintained its core belief in the importance of establishing harmonious order. This order is metaphysical, but actualized and sustained by the efforts of humans. Individuals are thus expected to engage in a constant effort to cultivate themselves and improve their many relationships, thereby improving the harmonious balance in society.

While relations are maintained by all parties under the Confucian framework, the superior is the entity that guarantees order and trust. Superiors do not have a metaphysical claim to their role, but their actions and decisions are meant to bring about the best outcome for as many subordinates as possible. In pursuing this goal, they are assumed to be pursuing the betterment of society as a whole.

Scholars and sages such as Zhu Xi in the 12th century and Wang Yangming in the 16th century redefined and re-applied the key Confucian principles for their time. By today’s standards, these scholars were ‘opinion leaders’ for the collective identities of their societies. Although not primarily a scholar, Yu Dan comes closest to being the current opinion leader for Confucianism. She is a household name in Chinese communities and is the face and author of TV-series and bestselling books on the ‘Analects’ of Confucius (Dan, 2006, 2010).

Not surprisingly, given the nature of TV and international bestsellers, this popular version of Confucianism makes few references to metaphysics, focusing instead on self-improvement. It calls for every person to be at least the best version of herself and ideally a *junzi* (literally ‘lord’s son’, or gentleman). A *junzi* has a profound personality and remains wary of pettiness and parochialism. A person of deeds, rather than of words, he is ‘halting in speech, but quick in action’ (Analects IV) and knows when it is better to remain respectfully silent in a relationship. Moderation is his general approach to life, and is particularly important when he is pursuing an advantage or portraying himself to others. He will not meddle in matters of the state, public issues or anything for which he does not have immediate responsibility or authority.

This quotidian form of Confucianism can explain at least two of the three demarcation heuristics used by Chinese, South-Korean, Taiwanese and Singaporean students enrolled in PR courses. That they purport to attach less value to communication and more to action than their ‘Western’ peers is in accordance with the normative distinction that Confucianism draws between speaking and doing. This is particularly true for public relations with its inherently persuasive nature and its benefits to the organisation rather than to society. Likewise, the focus group participants’ self-perceived lack of communication aptitude reflects the low priority that Confucianism accords it. When queried, all participants blamed their ‘Confucian education’ for their allegedly underdeveloped communication talent.

Students did not ascribe their difficulty in relating to ‘Western’ case studies to their Confucian socialization. Nevertheless, the relational thinking they found missing is indeed prevalent in Confucian cultures, where harmony means establishing and balancing relationships in all directions, and all the time. Accordingly, Y.K Chung, one of the founders of the public relations profession in Taiwan, defines public relations as “cultivating understanding and harmony to achieve prosperity” (Freitag & Quesinberry Stokes, 2009, p. 157).

Implications for PR education

This study retains a caveat, in that it assessed neither the intensity, nor the centrality of Confucian values for each participating student individually. We instead assumed that cultural origin was an antecedent variable for all students when learning public relations. Similarly, we could not discern if there was an impact in the reverse direction: the interaction with 'Western' students over 'Western' concepts could have affected students' Confucian self-identity or their propensity to reflect upon it. Hence, future research will need to embed the focus group methodology in pre- and post-tests to possibly validate the demarcation heuristics observed here.

At least two of the three demarcation heuristics will likely impact the efficacy with which public relations is taught to students with a Confucian cultural background. It does not necessarily make it more difficult, but the heuristics indicate that instructors may need to take an approach that is somewhat different from what most textbooks purport. Calls to make education and thought leadership in public relations more diverse are not new, but mostly have a macroscopic perspective. Hence, even though increasing cultural diversity has long been a feature of public relations research (e.g. Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009), increasing cultural diversity in public relations classrooms can only be a first and general principle (Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005) as the demarcation heuristics have a more immediate relation to curriculum design.

Firstly - and very early in a public relations course - a holistic understanding of PR should be established that prevents the discipline from being misperceived as 'just communication'. Educators should instead familiarize Confucian learners with the concept of reputation as the result of an organisation's actions as well as its messages. Secondly, technical exercises in messaging and speaking (up) are best conducted continuously throughout course, not so much to improve students' personal communication skills, but rather their self-confidence.

More generally - and not ascribed to their cultural background by the participants of this study - the concept of multiple stakeholder relations might well be inherently plausible to learners with a Confucian cultural background. Hence, PR and other business processes are likely to be understood by Confucian learners as resulting from multiple relationships, rather than from an individual's or organisation's actions, as is often the case in 'Western' teaching materials (Gupta & Bartlett, 2007). This means that a course can be based on the paradigm of stakeholder management, with case studies (or other teaching materials) illustrating multi-polarity and networked management rather than the actions of individual business personae and their effects.

Lastly, PR- educators need to allow for meta-communication to take place in the classroom and for students to discuss on an ad hoc basis how their affinity to public relations is affected by their cultural background. When this is allowed to become the subject of reflective classroom discourse, future practitioners will be better able to function with the cultural 'other' (George, 2003). Such encounters which will only increase with the further growth of Asian economies.

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