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# The Socratic Method in the Introductory PR Course: an Alternative Pedagogy

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## Abstract

In the recent past several educators and practitioners have advocated the use of a Socratic dialogue or case method to teach public relations principles. Reported here are the results of an empirical study comparing student reactions to and perceptions of learning in introductory public relations courses using a traditional lecture format and a Socratic approach. The independent variables in this study are lecture and Socratic teaching methods. It was hypothesized that compared to students in a traditional course, students in the Socratic course would: (1) retain more factual information about public relations, (2) feel more confident in their knowledge and skills needed to work in public relations, (3) report more opportunity to practice critical thinking, (4) report more opportunity to practice problem solving skills, (5) report greater aspiration to work in public relations, and (6) report higher levels of course satisfaction.

For four of the six research questions examined, there were small differences between students who received traditional and Socratic instruction. These differences were in the direction expected but were not statistically significant. There were significant differences in the two groups showing that students who received the Socratic instruction reported more opportunities in practicing their critical thinking ability, and ability to solve practical public relations problems.

## 1. Introduction

There are similarities between public relations and law that argue for the use of Socratic instruction in public relations. First, in the contemporary environment there is high enrollment pressure on both public relations and law. Both fields can afford to use an instructional approach that does not pander to student preferences. Second, high enrollment in both public relations and law make an approach that can be applied in large classes attractive. Third, just as law students must be able to apply legal principles to new and novel situations, public relations students should develop the ability to apply principles of public relations and communication to new situations. Finally, just like many law students begin their education believing they have a sense of justice; many public relations students begin their education believing they have instincts or social skills which prepare them to practice public relations.<sup>1</sup> The Socratic method is useful to dispel this sense of inflated confidence in both groups.

This study provides an empirical demonstration of the Socratic method's effectiveness in an introductory public relations course. Specifically, the study used a pre- and post-test design to compare the results from two introductory public relations courses taught at the same university over the same period of time. One course was taught using a traditional lecture format. The other used a Socratic approach modeled, as much as possible, on an introductory law course.

## 2. Alternative pedagogies

Alschul and Woolverton argue that a Socratic is better suited to teach public relations introductory course than the traditional lecture method.<sup>2</sup> But the method itself is not clearly defined. Scholars often describe as "Socratic" any approach that involves either case examples or student involvement through discussion. We submit that this definition is too broad. This study tests a well established and well-defined version of the Socratic method used in most US law schools. The initial step in this method requires students read actual cases or reports of events in their profession. Then an instructor familiar with those events and the principles for their evaluation leads the students in a discussion. The purpose of the discussion is to lead the students to discover for themselves those principles by which the case can be evaluated.<sup>3</sup>

A case method of instruction has been common in US business schools for some time. It involves instruction based on some kind of story and its advocates believe students will be more likely to retain ideas they see applied in "real life."<sup>4</sup> This approach was rejected here because it assumes too high a level of student sophistication and because it requires guided discussions that are best done in small classes.<sup>5</sup>

Constructivist learning which is based on allowing students to construct knowledge was also rejected because it seems inappropriate for large introductory courses, and because it requires more sophisticated students.<sup>6</sup>

While the case method may be associated with all professions, including business, the Socratic method is most associated with instruction in law.<sup>7</sup> It is the well-established and well-defined form of the Socratic method used in most US law schools that was adopted for this study.

The Socratic method used here was first applied at Harvard Law School in the early 1860s.<sup>8</sup> The method was first adopted by Christopher Columbus Langdell and that it was so unpopular with students that Harvard's law

enrollment plummeted.<sup>9</sup> Despite initial student reactions, the technique had two major advantages. First, it was easily applied to large classes and second it did produce students who are better able than others to apply the principles of their profession.<sup>10</sup> Because of these two advantages law schools, which were apparently not concerned about student reactions, adopted the procedure almost universally.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Research questions

Based on the rationale detailed previously, this study sought to determine:

1. Whether students retain more factual information about public relations when taught in a Socratic method than when taught using a traditional lecture format.
2. Whether students feel more confident in their knowledge and skills needed to work in public relations when taught in a Socratic method than when taught using a traditional lecture format.
3. Whether students report more opportunity to practice critical thinking when taught in a Socratic method than when taught using a traditional lecture format.
4. Whether students report more opportunity to practice problem solving skills when taught in a Socratic method than when taught using a traditional lecture format.
5. Whether students report greater aspiration to work in the field of public relations when taught in a Socratic method than when taught using a traditional lecture format.
6. Whether students will report higher course satisfaction when taught in a Socratic method than when taught using a traditional lecture format.

### 4. Method

Subjects for this study were 227 undergraduate students enrolled in the introductory public relations course at a major 4-year southern university during the fall term of 2001. Seventy-five of these students were enrolled in a section taught using a traditional lecture approach and 152 were in a section taught using a slightly modified Socratic method. These two sections became the control and treatment group in this study. Subjects self-selected into the two classes without any knowledge that the sections would be taught using different approaches.

Pre-test questionnaires were administered during the first week of the fall 2001 term. Post-test questionnaires were administered before reviewing for the final examinations. A total of 205 students (75 from the traditional method class, 130 from the Socratic method class) participated in the pre-test. One hundred and fifty-three students took part in the post-test, 67 from the traditional class, 86 from the Socratic class.

To supplement the objective data, discussion groups of about 50 self-selected students from the Socratic class were conducted following the administration of the post-test. These focus groups were used primarily to further assess students' perception and satisfaction and to identify specific components of the Socratic course for future modification. The students were asked what they liked and did not like about the course. Results of these focus groups also help interpret results from the quantitative data analysis.

#### 4.1. Independent variables

The control (lecture) section was taught by a well-respected associate professor who holds a doctoral degree and has been teaching the course for more than 10 years. This professor has extensive professional experience that he incorporates into his lectures. His reputation both among students and his colleagues is impeccable. This individual was chosen because his history of success with the course helped reduce threats of external validity of the independent variables. The 75 students in this class were taught using a traditional lecture format. Reading

assignments from a textbook were followed by lectures enhanced with PowerPoint slide presentations. These lectures explained the readings and provided examples to illustrate principles. Students were evaluated via multiple choice tests.

The treatment (Socratic) section was also taught by an associate professor. This professor also has a Ph.D. and professional experience that he can incorporate in discussions. He is approximately the same age as the individual teaching the traditional course and has received recognition as an outstanding undergraduate teacher. To protect against any possible threat to external validity of the independent variables, instructors chosen were similar in all respects except those needed to provide the treatment differences. The only significant difference between the two instructors' backgrounds is that the one who taught the Socratic course is a law school graduate and has experience with the Socratic method of instruction. This class was taught using a slightly modified Socratic method. The modification involved using the first 3 weeks of a 15-week term to explain the teaching approach and to provide the students some background that would facilitate their analysis of assigned cases.

Following these introductory meetings students were assigned readings from *PR Week* and *Public Relations Tactics* (a monthly publication published by the Public Relations Society of America). Students were asked to brief the cases described in the readings and then individual students were called on in class to describe the case and answer questions about it. These questions included identification of objectives, publics, research, legal restrictions and public relations tactics. The questions and comments from the instructor were intended to help the students see principles that underlay the public relations problems or solutions described in the cases read. Students were evaluated using both essay questions that asked them to apply principles to cases and multiple choice questions designed to determine if they had read assigned material. Attendance and participation in recitation were also included in their grade calculations. No textbook was assigned but the law school concept of a "horn book" was explained and an appropriate text was identified.<sup>12</sup>

Other mechanical differences in the two sections included assigned seating and a strong attendance policy. The assigned seating used in the Socratic course was necessary to record attendance and recitations. The attendance policy was imposed both because it is typical of law school policies and because participation and attendance were essential to successful instruction.<sup>13</sup>

## 4.2. Dependent variables

Students' retention of factual information about public relations was measured using eight four-option multiple choice questions. The number of correct answers indicates the retention level. Different questions were used in the pre-test and post-test to avoid any recollection effect. Students' confidence in knowledge and skills, critical thinking ability, confidence in problem solving skills, career aspiration in public relations, and satisfaction with the course were operationalized using 7-item Likert scale questions.

Course satisfaction was measured with three questions added in the post-test questionnaire. The questionnaires were written and coded by a colleague at another university. This procedure was used to avoid any temptation to "teach to the questionnaires" by the instructors teaching the control and experimental groups.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Quantitative analysis

Of the six research questions examined, two were found to be significantly different. As shown in Table 1, while both groups generally agreed that they had opportunities to practice critical thinking and problem solving skills, there were significant differences in the degree of their agreement. Students taught in the Socratic method class

reported more opportunity to practice critical thinking ( $t=-4.75$ ,  $df=151$ ,  $p<.01$ , two-tailed) and more opportunity to practice in problem solving skills ( $t=-4.62$ ,  $df=151$ ,  $p<.01$ , two-tailed).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations: retention, confidence, aspiration, critical thinking, problem solving, course satisfaction

Item	Lecture		Socratic		Combined	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Retention (number of correct answers)	5.90	1.45	6.12	1.24	6.02	1.33
Confident in knowledge and skills	5.20	0.88	5.20	1.09	5.20	1.00
Aspire to work in PR	4.91	1.80	4.91	1.53	4.91	1.65
Course gave opportunity to think critically*	5.00	1.02	5.78	1.00	5.44	1.20
Course gave opportunity to practice problem solving*	4.73	1.16	5.58	1.10	5.21	1.20
Course satisfaction	6.03	0.79	6.16	0.83	6.10	0.81

\*Means differ significantly,  $p<.05$ .

Other non-significant differences shown in Table 1 indicated that the instructional method did not affect students' retention of factual knowledge, their levels of confidence in knowledge and skills, career aspiration, and course satisfaction. However, except students' career aspiration, it is worth noted that the pre- and post-test comparisons of variables asked in both tests, showed significant increases in each and both groups combined (see Table 2).

Table 2. Paired pre- and post-*t* tests: retention, confidence, aspiration

Item	Lecture		Pre-test Socratic		Combined		Lecture		Post-test Socratic		Combined	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Retention*	4.37	1.39	4.36	1.46	4.37	1.43	5.90	1.45	6.12	1.24	6.02	1.3
Confidence*	4.87	0.80	4.83	0.96	4.85	0.89	5.20	0.88	5.20	1.09	5.20	1.0
Aspiration	4.97	1.39	5.19	1.29	5.09	1.33	4.91	1.80	4.91	1.53	4.91	1.6

\*Means differ significantly,  $p < .05$ .

In both pre- and post-tests, both groups retained almost equally the factual knowledge on public relations, answering the questions correctly with an average (mode) of 4 out of 8 in the pre-test, and 6 out of 8 in the post-test. The paired  $t$  tests showed statistically significant increases in students' factual knowledge in the post-test (for the traditional class,  $t=-6.22$ ,  $df=66$ ,  $p<.01$ ; for the Socratic class,  $t=-9.60$ ,  $df=84$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Similarly, in each test both groups were in general agreement with their confidence in their public relations knowledge and skills, but the level of agreement increased from the average of 4.8 to 5.2 for both groups. The mean difference was statistically significant (for the traditional class,  $t=-2.93$ ,  $df=66$ ,  $p<.01$ ; for the Socratic class,  $t=-2.69$ ,  $df=84$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

The only non-significant pre-, post-test difference was students' career aspiration. Although the levels of agreement were slightly lower in the post-test ( $M=4.91$  for each and both groups combined), the differences were not significant.

Regarding course satisfaction, both groups rated highly (from 5.8 to 6.3) that they liked the instructional approach, that the course gave insight into public relations practices, and that the course helped them better understand the field of public relations.

## 5.2. Discussion groups finding summary

Most students publicly said they liked the approach and they were very positive about *PR Week*. However, two students approached the instructor privately and said they thought they were intimidated and not prepared to make recitations in front of the introductory class. They commented that the technique should be reserved for upper division classes.

In addition, there were equal numbers of students who intensely disliked the attendance policy, and those who thought it actually motivated them to attend. Regarding the assigned seating, students who were seated in the back of the tiered lecture hall room did not like the assigned seating. Some said they could not hear well. No students reported that they read the hornbook (text book used in the lecture method class). On a positive note, several non-PR students reported that the course convinced them to change their major to PR. The PR majors said the course convinced them that they had selected the right major.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

Even though we found no statistically significant differences in retention of factual information, aspiration to practice public relations and satisfaction with the course between the two groups, the significant differences found in critical thinking and problem solving opportunities in the Socratic method class were encouraging. A 1999 survey jointly sponsored by PRSA and NCA found that critical thinking and problem solving skills were among the most important skills desired from entry-level public relations practitioners.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the results reported here do seem conceptually significant. Particularly when combined with results from the focus groups these data still support use of the Socratic method. The empirical results show a small and statistically non-significant preference for the Socratic approach. In the focus groups students frequently mentioned their trepidation about the class recitations in the Socratic approach. Their reasons for resisting these recitations ranged from performance anxiety to resentment about the greater and more frequent preparation required.

Further, the focus groups provided substantial support for the Socratic course instructor's perceptions that this method was much more labor intensive for the students than is a traditional lecture course. Given the higher work load and the performance anxiety one would have anticipated students would report a greater preference for the traditional lecture format.



Recall that when Langdell first used the Socratic method at Harvard Law School the approach was so unpopular with students that enrollment there plunged. It should also be noted here that during the first 2 days of the Socratic course approximately 10% of the students in that section did drop. Here it is possible students genuinely prefer a class that gives them an opportunity to think critically and to apply what they have learned. Of course it is also possible that those students who would have reported disenchantment with the course simply dropped and are therefore not part of the post-test. It is also possible the course, because of its novelty enjoyed a positive Hawthorne effect.

The empirical results also show that students in the Socratic course scored slightly higher on an objective test of public relations knowledge. Again this difference is small and statistically non-significant. But the fact that it exists at all speaks favorably for the Socratic approach. Students in the experimental section were not assigned readings from any textbook. Their only introduction to the field of public relations was through notes posted on the Internet and information provided in class discussions. Despite the absence of traditional systematically organized information that they could easily review students in the Socratic course knew as much about public relations as did those in the traditional lecture course. This suggests that the Socratic course, at least, did not fail to provide objective information while it also provided greater critical thinking and problem solving experiences.

The Socratic method has some merit. It may improve students' critical thinking abilities and their ability to solve practical public relations problems while still providing adequate objective information about the field. However, it does have disadvantages. Anyone considering adopting this approach should be aware of these problems.

From the point of view of an instructor the most significant disadvantage of the Socratic method is workload. The professor who taught the course used in this study has taught a traditional lecture format introduction to public relations course for nearly 20 years. He estimated the preparation time for the Socratic course at two to three times that of a lecture format course. Students also reported that they spend more time preparing for the Socratic course than they did for other lecture format courses.

Other concerns expressed by students included resentment for the assigned seating and attendance policies that were part of the Socratic course. Also, it does seem significant that almost 10% of the students in the Socratic section dropped the course in the first week. Most of these students, who gave a reason for the decision, reported performance anxiety associated with the class recitations.

For a typical public relations program with enrollment pressure it may be attractive to create an introductory course that discourages some students. From the results of the focus groups it appears possible that the most successful public relations students may prefer the Socratic method while those less academically motivated and skilled may avoid it. This possibility alone makes further exploration of this teaching method attractive.

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one given to experimental subjects in this study as an example of a Socratic discourse. If an instructor substitutes the roles of journalists and public relations practitioners for the poets and rhapsodes he or she can help undergraduates almost make sense of the technique.

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- [11] J.D. Gordon III, op. cit., p. 1685.
- [12] A “hornbook” as that term is used in law school, refers to a supplementary text or a book that explains principles students would otherwise be expected to identify from reading cases: here the “hornbook” identified was a traditional basic public relations textbook.
- [13] A complete syllabus and outline of subjects covered in the Socratic course are on-line at [www.mcom.ttu.edu/mparkinson/pr.html](http://www.mcom.ttu.edu/mparkinson/pr.html)
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