

## The College at Brockport: State University of New York Digital Commons @Brockport

---

Communication Faculty Publications

Communication

---

2012

# Making It Real: Using a Collaborative Simulation to Teach Crisis Communications

Karen S. Olson

*The College at Brockport*, [ksolson@brockport.edu](mailto:ksolson@brockport.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/cmc\\_facpub](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/cmc_facpub)

 Part of the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Olson, Karen S., "Making It Real: Using a Collaborative Simulation to Teach Crisis Communications" (2012). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 3.

[https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/cmc\\_facpub/3](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/cmc_facpub/3)

### Citation/Publisher Attribution:

Olson, K. S. (2012). Making It Real: Using a Collaborative Simulation to Teach Crisis Communications. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 23(2). [celt.muohio.edu/ject/issue.php?v=23&n=2](http://celt.muohio.edu/ject/issue.php?v=23&n=2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

Olson, K. S. (2012). Making it real: Using a collaborative simulation to teach crisis communications. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 23 (2), 25-47.

## **Making It Real: Using a Collaborative Simulation to Teach Crisis Communications**

Karen S. Olson

*The College at Brockport, State University of New York*

*Even seasoned public relations (PR) practitioners can find it difficult to handle communications during a crisis situation when the consequences of making poor decisions may seem overwhelming. This article shares results from using a collaborative simulation to teach college students about crisis communications in an advanced-level PR course. During this experiential-learning activity, students confront responsibilities and make decisions faced by PR professionals as they deal with a client's crisis and plan a news conference that is attended by journalism students. During the simulation, students have many opportunities to "fail," yet succeed at the same time. They also learn valuable lessons that stay with them years afterward.*

I learned that no matter how prepared you think you are, you are wrong! There will always be something that you didn't think of, or that goes wrong. . . . The hard part is dealing with all the unexpected things surrounding the crisis situation. Overall, this unit was a learning experience that no book or lecture could ever teach (Amanda, a 2009 student).

Even seasoned public relations (PR) practitioners can find it difficult to handle communications during a crisis, when the consequences of making poor decisions may seem overwhelming. While a crisis is not the type of situation that should be left to on-the-job learning, it often is. I speak from experience, having faced my first crisis situation within the first six months of my first PR job.

A crisis is caused by a triggering event that impacts an organization's routine behaviors and relationships but is often seen from a PR perspective as presenting communication opportunities (Ho & Hallahan, 2004). Because the potential triggering event can range from a small product recall to a catastrophic act of nature, crisis communications is a consistently well-attended topic at professional PR conferences.

Crisis communications is an important topic in PR classrooms as well. But while reading and discussing case studies provide a good starting point, the tension and drama of actually dealing with a crisis situation are missing. When I began teaching PR courses, the memory of my first crisis experience was still vivid after a 25-year career in public relations. To help students understand the challenges of managing communications during a crisis situation before actually dealing with one, I decided to incorporate a crisis simulation into my advanced-level Public Relations Campaigns course.

Simulations help students acquire discipline-specific knowledge that can be transferred to a professional setting, while teaching processes involved in a particular discipline (Hertel & Millis, 2002). They also engage students in a form of active learning, which Bonwell and Eison (1991) define as "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (p. 2). Active learning not only requires student involvement through action and participation, it also requires intellectual, physical, and/or emotional energy in a "learner-focused approach that is based upon changing learners' knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Madsen, 2007, p. 12).

A simulation was added to my PR course to answer the following questions:

- Can a simulation prepare students to handle crisis communications better than other teaching methods?
- Can a simulation increase students' critical-thinking and problem-solving skills?
- Can a simulation improve students' teamwork, communication, and leadership abilities?
- Can a simulation help students gain a more long-lasting and meaningful understanding of challenges to effective communication during a crisis?

The first step was developing a simulation that would give college students an opportunity to experience challenges they might realistically

encounter while handling communications for a client facing a crisis situation. This immersion activity would not be presented as a game, project, or academic exercise, but as a real situation they must handle themselves. According to Sasley (2010), "Simulations are a good way to teach students about the possibility of failure, and how to learn from it, because they allow students to go through the learning process on their own" (p. 61). While working through a crisis scenario and planning a news conference for "the media," students would have many opportunities to "fail," yet succeed at the same time.

To be truly effective, the simulation also needed to be an integral part of the course, not a stand-alone activity (Garard, Hunt, Lippert, & Paynton, 1998; Smith & Boyer, 1996; Wedig, 2008). This was accomplished by giving my class—already organized as an agency developing PR campaigns for nonprofit organizations—an additional, though fictional, "client" needing help with an evolving crisis situation. As noted by Fink (2003), "In a powerful learning experience, students will be engaged in their own learning, there will be a high energy level associated with it, and the whole process will have important outcomes or results" (pp. 6-7). Students would have an opportunity to apply their existing knowledge to a crisis situation while dealing with the ramifications of context and ambiguity at the same time.

This article discusses the rationale, process, and benefits of using a collaborative simulation to teach college students about crisis communications in a PR course during the spring semesters of 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011. Data are based on my observations throughout the simulations, student comments during debriefing sessions, and reports written by students immediately after their simulation experience. Responses to a survey sent to former students one, two, or three years after taking part in a crisis simulation provide additional insights regarding the long-term impact of this experiential activity. Individuals' responses to the survey are designated by a randomly assigned letter followed by the year of the person's simulation experience (for example, Student X, 2007).

## **Literature Review**

Within the scholarship of teaching and learning, there is a great deal of interest in learner-centered approaches to teaching that involve students beyond listening and taking notes (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Faust & Paulson, 1998; Madsen, 2007; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model "pursues a framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal

development" (p. 4). A basic premise of experiential learning is that people learn more by doing. Retention is also greater when teaching includes actual experience along with reflection, abstract conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

Lennon and Gonzalez (2006) suggest that as students become active learners they are more motivated to succeed, while also becoming more critical in their views as a result of making their own decisions rather than simply accepting the ideas of others. Successfully motivating students can significantly increase their participation, engagement, and learning as well (Hertel & Millis, 2002; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). Solving problems, the basis of problem-based learning activities like simulations, can be very motivating for students, while also aiding retention and application (Fink, 2003). Significant learning is brought about by simulations because gathering information, making key decisions, and reaching conclusions are "in the hands—and minds—of the students" (Hertel & Millis, 2002, p. 11).

I have found that educational simulations described in the literature fall into three general categories: (a) those requiring assigned role-playing for interactions among students, (b) those where student interactions are computer-based (often referred to as simulation games), and (c) those in which students are placed into a simulated situation but interact with others as themselves rather than playing assigned roles. My work fits into the third category. A collaborative simulation is one that involves at least two classes that do not normally interact but come together to provide a more realistic experience for the participating students, who must use concepts and skills from their respective areas of study (Olson, 2010).

I have not found a commonly used definition for educational simulations in general; and according to Hertel and Millis (2002), "simulations have no agreed-upon definitions, even as used in higher education" (p. ix). Yet despite the lack of a commonly accepted definition, there are many studies about the use of simulations in college classrooms, especially in political science, international relations, history, business, and medicine. There are very few examples of simulations used in public relations or journalism courses, however. One study of role playing in a journalism ethics course was credited by students as a major learning experience for them (Brislin, 1995), while King and Morrison (1998) experimented with computer-based simulations in their media planning courses and found them to be "a valuable, real world experience seldom available in the classroom" (p. 36). Similar in some respects to my work with collaborative simulations, Veil (2010) also uses crisis situations in a news conference format involving both PR and journalism students, although there are significant differences in our approaches.

A lack of published studies assessing the long-term impact of using simulations in college classrooms presents another gap in the literature that my survey of former students, while limited in scope, does begin to address.

### **Developing a Collaborative Simulation for Crisis Communications**

When a crisis situation begins to unfold, one of the first activities for PR professionals is working with the news media; reporters need accurate information even if all the facts are not yet available. Therefore, planning and managing a news conference for their client became the major component of my collaborative simulation for PR students. To make the experience as realistic as possible, I also envisioned students working with “reporters” and “client representatives” who were not part of their class. This approach has proven to be indispensable in making the simulation experience seem very real and thus increasing the significant learning opportunities for students.

Finding reporters to cover the simulated news conference has been easily accomplished by collaborating with journalism professors who are willing to involve their students. As a bonus, the PR and journalism students ultimately must interact as their professional counterparts do when facing the challenges of their respective communication roles during an emerging crisis situation.

Making the client for my PR class a fictional university made it possible to enlist colleagues from other departments as subject experts capable of responding appropriately to questions from the student reporters. Their knowledge is crucial to the authenticity, and sometimes the unpredictability, of the simulated news conference. Local actors have also been used for more generic roles.

The final step is creating a crisis scenario that could actually happen: The simulation experience must seem real, not merely entertaining. During the first collaborative simulation in 2007, I knew that efforts to create a realistic situation had been successful when a journalism student turned to his instructor during the simulated news conference to ask, “*This is made up, right?*”

Responding to a survey three years later, a PR student still remembered the experience:

The amount of details we were given about the situation, the acting of the characters involved as well as the attendance of the journalism students created a sense of authenticity that

made the situation as close to real life as a simulation could be.  
(Student A, 2007)

Preparing PR students for their simulation experience includes looking at sample crisis communications plans, reviewing key concepts, and discussing case studies. Students are then given information about their new client, and an emerging crisis requiring a news conference is planned as soon as possible. They also receive names and e-mail addresses for three “client representatives” (pre-arranged role players) who will be available to take part in the news conference *if asked*. Finally, students are told that the agency’s president (their instructor) will serve as their liaison with the client and “carry messages” as requested. At this point, students are completely in charge of what happens next.

In another part of the building, journalism students who will be on the “client’s official media list” are informed they will soon be invited to a news conference.

### **During the Simulation**

In *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*, Finkel (2000) describes good teaching as the creation of circumstances that lead to significant learning in others. He also insists that students learn by actively confronting a problem, thinking it through on their own, and figuring out what they want to know or do. In his words, “Teaching with your mouth shut entails (a) avoiding the natural temptation to teach through Telling, and (b) providing students with instructive experiences and then provoking them to reflect on those experiences” (p. 162).

After getting the necessary information for their simulation experience to begin, there is usually a long period of silence as students look at one another, wondering what to do. For example:

It was a very overwhelming experience to know that we as a class had to work together without any input from our professor. Once we all sat around for a while and realized our professor isn’t going to do any more talking, we put our ideas on the table and began working. (Student L, 2009)

Eventually, one or more students attempt to take on a leadership role, with differences each year based on the personalities of those in the classroom. For example, one student reported, “I remember having difficulty deciding, as a PR team, where to begin. One mistake was that we were too eager to begin ‘doing’ and didn’t take enough time to figure out what really needed to be the focus of the plan” (Student Q, 2009).



When students begin to discuss specific tasks, those considered to be good writers are typically given responsibility for written materials such as news releases, fact sheets, and backgrounders. Anyone with experience that is relevant to the crisis situation becomes an information resource for the PR team. When the 2009 course crisis involved a college athletic department, for example, the student with the most sports knowledge was given an uncustomary leadership role. This fits with Wedig's (2008) observation that students who are not the most likely candidates may nonetheless end up in leadership positions during a simulation.

As students struggle to find constructive ways of handling any differences of opinion about what needs to be done, they become immersed into the simulation as a PR team rather than as a group of students doing a class exercise. However, an absolutely essential aspect of making the simulation experience real for students is always allowing them to be in control of their decisions and actions. As one student put it, "I enjoyed the experience more because our professor remained as a supervisor during the simulation, which made me and my fellow classmates have to communicate and work together as a team" (Student E, 2008).

Although it can be difficult for an instructor to keep quiet when mistakes are being made, any urge to intervene must be suppressed. The benefits of this experiential activity would be greatly reduced if I were to react overtly or direct students in any way. It is sometimes possible to help them avoid going too far off track through "the client's" (my) responses to their questions, but ultimately, students must decide for themselves if and how they will use that information.

### **The Main Event: A Simulated News Conference**

On the day of the simulated news conference, no one—including instructors, role players, and students—knows exactly what will happen. Nonetheless, there are aspects of planning and implementing this component of the simulation that have been the same every year:

- The PR students send a media advisory to participating journalism students with the date, time, and location of a news conference for their client.
- In addition to the allotted class sessions, planning a news conference requires significant time outside the classroom.



- On the day of the news conference, the PR students arrive early to set up the room and review information with the spokespeople (role players) they have invited to take part.
- Before the scheduled news conference, journalism students receive the transcript of “a call to the newsroom” urging them to investigate a big problem involving the PR team’s client. The PR students do not know about this call, and the reporters will ultimately need to determine if anything the caller has said is true.
- An unexpected person (role player) connected to the crisis situation shows up at the news conference to share “my side of the story.” This occurrence always makes the biggest impression: Both PR and journalism students are extremely surprised when this happens and are completely unsure what to do.
- The PR students try to handle the disruption in a professional manner, but eventually someone decides that the only solution is to end the news conference abruptly, a reaction that continues to surprise me despite seeing it happen every time thus far.
- When the news conference ends, the disruptive person doesn’t leave immediately, which frustrates the PR team. It takes only one enterprising journalist asking the new role player a question, however, before other reporters rush to join in.

A difference in what takes place during each year’s news conference is how the journalism students go about asking questions. In 2007, they immediately bombarded the spokespersons with questions ranging from straightforward attempts to clarify information to very pointed, and even a bit outrageous, questions based on the call made to their newsrooms. In 2008, despite more journalism students taking part than ever before, very few of the reporters asked questions. A smaller group of reporters in 2009 also had trouble deciding what to do. According to their journalism professor, “I was shocked that most of my students sat there and took the information in, but asked no questions.” Some journalism students said afterward they were also surprised at having trouble thinking of something to say; several others admitted to being shy about questioning

the speakers. In 2011, the journalism students once again asked a lot of questions with several being fairly aggressive.

### **Debriefing**

After the simulated news conference, the PR students are always energized and excited about their experience. While eager to share how they felt and what they learned, students are especially anxious to ask questions about what they should have done. The journalism instructors report similar reactions among their students.

A well-facilitated debriefing session is an extremely important component of any classroom simulation (Hertel & Millis, 2002; Petranek, 2000; Petranek, Corey, & Black, 1992; Sasley, 2010; Wedig, 2008). Although students immediately want to hear their instructor's opinion of what took place, it is very important for them to do their own assessment first. The PR students benefit from evaluating the news conference and resulting articles written by student reporters in the same way their professional counterparts do: by reviewing and discussing what took place and if different actions on their part might have changed any of the outcomes.

During the debriefing session, it is also important to help students realize they cannot control what happens, no matter how well prepared they are. They can, however, usually help manage even a difficult situation to keep it from escalating completely out of control. As one student reflected, "After the simulation, I felt like I had really prepared and helped deal with a PR crisis, and felt that I had learned some valuable lessons from the experience, such as no matter how much you plan, you can't control what will happen; you can only control how you react to it" (Student B, 2007).

A common sentiment shared by students every year is that being part of an unfolding crisis and not knowing how it will end is very different from analyzing case studies. They also report learning more from their mistakes and things they don't anticipate than from the things that go well. When faced with a real crisis at work a year later, one former student said, "because we have worked on this and learned from our mistakes, I could handle it without freaking out and be more prepared" (Student R, 2009).

Debriefing is crucial in helping all participating students process their simulation experience and, thereby, benefit more fully from it. These sessions also help teachers identify any concepts, processes, or other aspects of what has taken place that need to be more fully discussed or clarified. For example, several PR students in 2008 told reporters they had to leave the room when the news conference ended, and others on the PR team

seemed to be guarding their spokespeople to keep reporters away from them. Two years later, one of those students still remembered this: "The press was generally viewed as enemies, an interesting dynamic since I was part of *The Stylus* [campus newspaper] crew outside of class" (Student D, 2008).

In 2011, the PR students spent more time trying to prevent reporters from talking to the "business executive" they hadn't invited than they did trying to get reporters to talk with their client's representatives. Although I have been surprised by this "us versus them" attitude among the PR students every year, the debriefing sessions provide a perfect opportunity to talk about the media relations role of PR practitioners and how to assist journalists in getting accurate information.

### **Written Reports and Assessment**

Petranek et al. (1992) make a strong case for a three-level learning process during an educational simulation: participating, oral debriefing, and journal writing. Finkel (2000) believes that "one of the most effective means for reflecting on experience is writing" (p. 154). Wills and Clerkin (2009) see the value of reflective writing as well:

Even if students have an extensive understanding of the business field, many have had no way to test their skills. The simulation provides this opportunity, and the reflective practices further integrate theory and practice. Without reflection on decisions and processes, students have no idea how to improve in future transactions or why they did or did not succeed. (p. 225)

Petranek (2000) also stresses the importance of a written debriefing: "Longer reflection is essential for learning, and it brings perspective to the whirlwind of activity. . . . Written debriefing is the next step in the learning process because people are again learning by doing" (pp. 109-110).

I definitely agree that a very important, yet possibly overlooked, component of any classroom simulation is having students first reflect on what took place and then write about it.

After the simulated news conference, the journalism students are graded on the news stories they write. The PR students also read these articles to determine how successful they were in getting accurate coverage of the client's situation. One PR student in 2007 even did a formal analysis of every article written to see what aspects of the crisis situation had been featured most often in headlines and lead paragraphs, an example of how a collaborative simulation can engage and motivate students in unanticipated ways. For the spring 2011 simulation, all journalism students were

required to write and post their news reports as blogs, reflecting the new technologies and methods available to reporters. Many of them added photos or video clips from the news conference, giving the PR students even more to evaluate.

After the oral debriefing session and time to reflect on their experience, the PR students each must write two follow-up reports: one for “the client” and one for “the agency.” Both reports are graded primarily on their analysis and understanding of what took place and what could have been improved rather than on what the student did or did not do during the simulation. Reports for the client provide an assessment of the news conference, evaluation of the “published” news stories, and next-step recommendations for handling the still unresolved crisis. Reports for the agency detail a student’s responsibilities and actions during the simulation, suggestions for things that should have been done differently, and a summary of what was learned.

Students generally are very honest, even insightful at times, about what took place. Because their reports provide details of activities and decisions made outside the classroom, they also provide a more complete picture of what was going on before, during, and immediately after the simulated news conference.

## **Results**

After my first use of a collaborative simulation to teach crisis communications in 2007, a student’s anonymous comments on the confidential Instructional Assessment System (IAS) evaluation illustrated its potential as an effective teaching method:

The unit on crisis situations was excellent and should be redone in future classes. For the first time, a course is far more than what I can read in a book and will actually help me once I graduate and enter the real working world.

After four years of using collaborative simulations, the PR students continue to describe their experience as a valuable learning opportunity that will have a lasting impact. In his final reflection paper, one student in 2011 shared this evaluation:

Looking back, I wish I would have acted rationally as opposed to letting chaos occur around me. . . . As with most things in life, there is a lesson learned. In PR you very rarely have control of a situation, but there is also an opportunity to manage it. If I could do it all over again, I would tell myself to leave my emotions at the door and start to think rationally. Crisis situations

are difficult to handle because you never know what to expect. However, you can prepare yourself the best you can and “expect the unexpected.” Next time around, I’m confident I can take on the unexpected! (Tom, a 2011 student)

Negative aspects of taking part in a collaborative simulation as shared by some students included wanting more preparation before being asked to plan a news conference and needing more class time to get ready. Yet even those expressing concerns are positive about their overall experience, as seen in this final, confidential course assessment from a 2008 student:

The crisis unit should have been much more in depth so that we could better understand the necessary procedures, but I would recommend anyone going into public relations to take this unit because it really prepared you for the worst-case scenario. This is the ultimate test of working on your feet with little facts and limited time. If you can survive a crisis, you can put together and execute any campaign.

In my second year of doing collaborative simulations, students were given identical pre- and post-surveys to see if there would be any differences in their approach to handling crisis communications after taking part in this activity. These surveys asked the following:

1. If faced with a crisis situation, what are the first three things a PR person or team should do?
2. Does the magnitude of the crisis situation make a difference in what a PR person or team should do first?
3. In planning a news conference for a crisis situation, create a to-do list for the public relations team.

After three years of doing pre- and post-surveys, I have found that the biggest change in students’ responses is not a greater knowledge of what needs to be done, but a deeper understanding of the challenges involved in doing it. This is a significant difference. Another clearly seen change is in students’ lists of what to do when planning a news conference for a crisis, which invariably become more specific and tactical in nature *after* the simulation. It is reasonable to conclude that these changes in students’ answers are a direct result of having actually planned and carried out by themselves a news conference for a crisis situation.

## **Benefits and Limitations**

During a simulation, participants unconsciously process all types of information: facts, emotions, strategies, outcomes, relationships, feelings, and much more. . . . Learning happens because the students are active and not passive in the process. (Petranek et al., 1992, p. 176)

McCrickerd (2010) has found that while taking part in a multi-week role-playing simulation, students in her undergraduate ethics class develop a range of transferrable skills, including leadership; critical thinking; listening; group decision-making; consensus building; priority setting; and dealing with conflict, frustration, and unpredictability. The similarity of McCrickerd's list of benefits to what I see when PR students take part in a collaborative simulation is striking. My students also improve their problem-solving skills while learning to cope with ambiguity and the stress of not being sure what will happen next. Because they have a limited amount of time to plan a news conference that involves other people, the PR students learn to work more efficiently and effectively as a communications team as well. For example, they realize not everyone on a team can be "the leader" but that leadership is required. They also discover the importance of dividing responsibilities and tasks among team members to best meet the needs of the situation rather than just trying to accommodate what people like or want to do:

In the real world, unexpected and unplanned events happen all the time, even if you already have a caseload of work that needs to be done. [The crisis] helped us learn to make certain jobs priorities, as well as hone our time management, organization and decision-making skills. It also helped me to learn to work better with a team, especially when people are using their strengths for a common goal. We were frustrated at times, but in the end, through teamwork, my class was able to pull off what I believe was a solid conclusion to the activity. (Student G, 2008)

### *Benefits*

Although the number of students in my advanced-level PR course and the specific crisis situation being handled are different every year, I have identified six consistently seen benefits from using a collaborative simulation to teach crisis communications. The first five benefits include a range of skills that are applicable to many other areas of study as well.

**1. Students Learn to Evaluate Information More Carefully.**

Students eventually realize they must determine who and what to believe when faced with incomplete, and sometimes even contradictory, versions of the “facts.” They report making poor decisions from not doing enough research to verify information or missing discrepancies due to skimming rather than carefully reading the background materials they are given. In 2007, the PR team relied on statements from others about what a key person involved in the crisis had said and done, which later led to frenzied efforts to rectify their mistake.

**2. Students Realize That Making Assumptions Can Cause Big Problems.**

In 2009, the entire class assumed a key spokesperson with a gender-neutral first name was a man. On the day of the news conference, panicked students grabbed copies of their news release when “he” turned out to be a woman. The unanimous reaction? “I’ll never make that mistake again!” Simply warning students to be careful about making assumptions would not have had the same impact. A year later, they were still talking about this mistake as a major learning experience.

**3. Students Discover That the Unexpected Can and Will Happen.**

The unexpected aspects of a simulation are always vividly remembered, and the difficulty of handling an unplanned disruption makes a huge impression. As a student said, “The main thing I learned from this crisis was that it’s imperative to prepare for even the most unexpected situations” (Student S, 2009).

**4. Students Experience the Difficulty of Making Decisions During an Evolving Situation.**

“What to do seems so easy and clear-cut when we read case studies and discuss what to do during a crisis situation,” Sara, a 2009 student, reported after a news conference when a lot of things had not gone according to plans. Students also discover they can draw on their knowledge from previous classes and from their life experiences to help them make reasonably good decisions.



### **5. Students Learn to Handle Many Aspects of Professional Teamwork.**

During the simulation, students find working as a team on behalf of a client can be similar but also different from working on a group project for a grade. They figure out ways to productively deal with different work styles, accommodate and manage group dynamics, realistically assess available resources to accomplish tasks, prioritize what needs to be done, and leverage individual differences to achieve shared goals.

### **6. Students Gain a Better Understanding of the Complementary Roles of Public Relations and Journalism.**

The PR students discover that their key messages will be used in news releases if they have been communicated clearly, but it is their responsibility to provide the media with information that is both accurate and concise. They also gain a better understanding of their media relations role, such as paying attention to the types of questions reporters ask and helping them get answers from knowledgeable sources. The journalism students often gain an appreciation for the challenges facing PR practitioners, too, especially when watching them trying to cope with unexpected developments during the news conference.

#### *Limitations*

A potential limitation to using any type of classroom simulation is the significant amount of time needed to create and implement one, and developing a collaborative simulation can take even more time due to the extra coordination required among partnering teachers and any role-playing participants. Another limitation stems from the gaps in what teachers can personally observe while their students are engaged in this type of activity. Although students always begin discussing options and trying to make decisions as one group, they eventually realize they need to delegate tasks, which leads to people working in different combinations and even in different places. Especially during the simulated news conference, it is impossible to see what every student is doing or not doing, saying or not saying. It is useful, therefore, to think of ways to augment a teacher's personal observations *before* a collaborative simulation begins. For example, I schedule post-simulation meetings with role players to get details about their interactions with my PR students. Students who are not in the participating classes have also been asked to videotape the

news conference, which adds to the realism because they appear to be TV reporters. The journalism instructors often share pertinent comments from their students as well, providing yet another useful perspective.

### **What Students Remember Years Later**

As noted by McKeachie and Svinicki (2006), “cognitive theory provides good support for the idea that knowledge learned and used in a realistic, problem-solving context is more likely to be remembered and used appropriately when needed later” (p. 227). While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to support simulations as benefiting students in terms of retaining more of what is learned, developing critical thinking and analytical skills, and gaining a better understanding of complex interactions, there is little quantified or standardized evidence of these benefits (Smith & Boyer, 1996).

After three years of doing collaborative simulations, I wanted to find out what former students might remember about their simulation experience and if anything they had learned was eventually used in some way. To do this, I developed a survey consisting of five open-ended questions and one question to identify the year a student had taken part (see Appendix A). There was no potential benefit or retribution for any former student who chose to answer my survey because all but four of them had already graduated, and none of the students still at the college would be taking another class with me.

A total of 28 students had participated in a collaborative simulation from 2007 through 2009. Although I was unable to locate three people from the 2007 class, the survey was sent to all of the other students. Twenty former students (representing 71% of the total number of participants over three years) answered my survey questions, for an 80% response rate. Respondents included three of the seven students from 2007 (43%), eight of the 12 students from 2008 (67%), and all nine students from 2009 (100%).

I found the survey results to be both encouraging and surprising. Specific details of the crisis scenario they had worked on were accurately remembered by 16 of the 20 respondents (80%), including two people taking part in the first simulation three years earlier. In fact, all respondents from 2007 still had vivid memories of their overall experience. Even more important, they reported subsequently using aspects of what they had learned. One former student spoke of writing risk management plans at work, while another said, “the most important thing I have used from the course is to be on your toes and ready for anything” (Student C, 2007). The third respondent from 2007 stated,

Any situation that has you thinking on the spot in front of many people when you are EXTREMELY nervous is a good experience, and I have been put in that situation for work many times. I think this exercise helps with this—knowing you will be faced with the unexpected and that it will be ok. (Student A, 2007)

Being completely in charge during the simulation and needing to make all the decisions were frequently credited by respondents from all three years as helping them learn to communicate better. One former student even kept copies of the 105 e-mail messages that were exchanged among team members in less than two weeks (Student N, 2009). Nine respondents (45%) talked of learning to work as a team, including the difficult aspects of not always being sure what others were doing and positive aspects like dividing tasks to get everything done more quickly and helping each other make written materials more accurate.

Several respondents referred to the benefits of doing a “hands-on” activity as helping them learn through personal experience; others appreciated the debriefing session and time “to reflect on what we did, and what we could have done differently” (Student T, 2009). Eight former students (40%) said the simulation had seemed very real and helped them learn about crisis communications in a personal way. One student said, “After actually experiencing [a crisis], I understand 100 times more how to handle the situation and what to do next time” (Student O, 2009). Another student said,

I have been a part of a couple minor crises and news conferences since taking the course. Having already experienced the crisis simulation, I felt more prepared to deal with the real-life situations. . . . I learned that having that helpless feeling as a PR professional during a news conference / media interview is quite normal. You can prepare a spokesperson the best you can, but you cannot always prevent discrepancies in the final messages that are communicated. (Student I, 2008)

When asked what could have been done differently to enhance their simulation experience, two former students from the same class provided somewhat different answers. According to one respondent, “I think it was very beneficial, it gave a glimpse at what real life PR is like, chaotic and unpredictable” (Student K, 2008). Another former student said, “We were not always able to be part of every detail. . . . Sometimes, I felt like I did not know what was going on because there were too many students working on different areas” (Student J, 2008).

Nineteen of the 20 respondents (95%) remembered some of the specific things they had done during the simulation; 16 respondents (80%)

described things they had learned; and 14 respondents (70%) identified specific ways they had used something from their simulation experience. The only respondent who remembered very few details about the simulation had been absent when the planning of the news conference was going on; however, this former student still thought taking part in the simulated news conference was beneficial.

I was surprised to find 55% of the respondents clearly remembered how they felt during the simulation, such as being proud of successfully working as a team and being nervous about what to do when unexpected things started happening. Several respondents remembered being calm and a little overconfident at first; others remembered feeling anxious, alert, shocked, eager, overwhelmed, or frustrated.

Words used to characterize their overall simulation experience included “fun,” “engaging,” “exciting,” “memorable,” “different,” and “immensely enjoyable.” There was 100% agreement that a simulation dealing with crisis communications should be continued in future PR classes, with eight respondents adding “definitely” or “absolutely,” and others describing it as being “relevant” or “highly recommended”:

There is no better way to learn how to handle a situation than to be thrown right into it. The good thing about being put in this situation in a classroom setting is that, in the end, nothing really bad happened, and you have a chance to learn where you made mistakes or could have changed something to make it go more smoothly and the way we would ideally like it to go. (Student R, 2009)

## **Conclusions**

Citing research by Stice (1987) that students retain only 50% of what they see and hear but 90% of what they do and say, Smith and Boyer (1996) conclude that covering less material to provide time for a classroom simulation is a negligible disadvantage when students can benefit from increased retention levels and a deeper understanding.

While working for their “client,” students are always fully involved in ways I do not see during other types of activities. The depth of their commitment reflects Fink’s (2003) description of significant learning experiences that will be important in students’ lives because they include foundational knowledge, application, integration, a human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn.

After four years of doing a collaborative simulation in an advanced-level PR course, my initial questions about the value of this experiential

approach for teaching crisis communications have been answered. Based on my observations plus the overwhelmingly positive reactions of students, this type of simulation can definitely (a) prepare them to handle crisis communications in ways traditional methods of teaching do not; (b) increase critical-thinking and problem-solving skills; (c) improve teamwork, communication, and leadership abilities; and (d) help students gain a long-lasting and meaningful understanding of challenges to effective communication during a crisis.

Although it is clearly impossible to teach students everything they might face when handling communications during a crisis, involving them in a very realistic, collaborative simulation is an excellent start. Students experience unexpected things happening with very little time to figure out what should be done in response. They learn the power of teamwork and how to deal with ambiguity. They also learn how to learn from their mistakes, which is the most valuable lesson of all.

Journalism instructors find the simulated news conference to be a great learning opportunity for their students as well. And the students who experience both sides of a collaborative simulation—the result of being in a participating journalism class one year and my PR class another year—gain a truly unique insight into challenges faced by both professions. Ultimately, both PR and journalism students must think on their feet, make quick decisions, and look for clues to understand what is happening during the simulation. PR students report their “hearts are beating faster” because they don’t know what they should do when faced with problems they never even considered. Journalism students discover that when something unexpected happens, they must remain calm, stay focused, and keep asking questions.

By using collaborative simulations, my goal of helping students actually feel what it can be like to handle communications during a crisis situation has been fulfilled beyond my initial expectations; and I firmly believe the benefits far surpass any limitations. However, verification of the positive, long-term impact from taking part in a collaborative simulation is definitely the most exciting result of my survey of former students. Aspects of their simulation experience were clearly remembered by 95% of the survey respondents, and 70% shared examples of how they subsequently used things they had learned.

After talking with teachers in other disciplines about situations and scenarios they might use for collaborative simulations, I am sure this experiential activity can be successfully adapted for students in other areas of study. In fact, it already has. A counselor education teacher who attended one of my presentations approached a colleague about using

my concept with their classes. At a teaching conference in January 2011, they shared the results of their endeavor:

This program will focus on how two graduate programs (Counselor Education and Educational Administration) collaborated on a project that prepared students to better collaborate in their future professional roles. . . . While this program is specific to enhancing the preparation of future school counselors and school administrators, the collaborative process can be extended to a variety of disciplines. (Reiner & Tobin, 2011)

It was exciting to hear how these instructors' version of a collaborative simulation had resulted in a very successful and more personal learning experience for their students, much as my interdisciplinary approach to teaching crisis communications has been benefiting students in public relations and journalism for several years.

### References

- Bonwell, C., & Eison, J. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, No. 1). Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.
- Brislin, T. (1995). Active learning in applied ethics instruction. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 6 (3), 161-167.
- Faust, J. L., & Paulson, D. R. (1998). Active learning in the college classroom. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 9 (2), 3-24.
- Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Finkel, D. (2000). *Teaching with your mouth shut*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.
- Garard, D. L., Hunt, S. K., Lippert, L., & Paynton, S. T. (1998). Alternatives to traditional instruction: Using games and simulations to increase learning and motivation. *Communication Research Report*, 15 (1), 36-44.
- Hertel, J. P., & Millis, B. J. (2002). *Using simulations to promote learning in higher education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Ho, F., & Hallahan, K. (2004). Post-earthquake crisis communications in Taiwan: An examination of corporate advertising and strategy motives. *Journal of Communication Management*, 8 (3), 291-306.
- King, K. W., & Morrison, M. (1998). A media buying simulation game using the Internet. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 53 (3), 28-36.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Lennon, R., & Gonzalez, M. (2006). International negotiation simulations:



- An examination of learning processes and outcomes. *College Teaching Methods & Styles Journal*, 2 (3), 43-52.
- Madsen, S. R. (2007). Action learning unveiled: Finding depth through understanding related constructs. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 18 (2), 5-25.
- McCrickerd, J. (2010, November). *Using & creating role-playing games: Achieving disciplinary, general education, and other outcomes*. Paper presented at 30<sup>th</sup> annual International Lilly Conference on College Teaching, Oxford, OH.
- McKeachie, W. J., & Svinicki, M. (2006). *McKeachie's teaching tips* (12<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Olson, K. S. (2010, November). *Why collaborative simulations provide a powerful learning experience for students and how to develop one*. Paper presented at 30<sup>th</sup> annual International Lilly Conference on College Teaching, Oxford, OH.
- Petranek, C. (2000). Reports & communications written debriefing: The next vital step in learning with simulations. *Simulation & Gaming*, 31 (1), 108-118.
- Petranek, C., Corey, S., & Black, R. (1992). Three levels of learning in simulations: Participating, debriefing, and journal writing. *Simulation & Gaming*, 23 (2), 174-185.
- Reiner, S., & Tobin, J. (2011, January). *Inter-department instructional collaboration*. Paper presented at the 2011 CELT Teaching & Learning Day, Brockport, NY.
- Sasley, B. E. (2010). Teaching students how to fail: Simulations as tools of explanation. *International Studies Perspectives*, 11 (1), 61-74.
- Smith, E. T., & Boyer, M. A. (1996). Designing in-class simulations. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 29 (4), 690-694.
- Stice, J. E. (1987). Using Kolb's learning cycle to improve student learning. *Engineering Education*, 77 (5), 291-296.
- Veil, S. R. (2010). Using crisis simulations in public relations education. *Communication Teacher*, 24 (2), 58-62.
- Wedig, T. (2008, February). *Getting the most from classroom simulations: Strategies for maximizing learning outcomes*. Paper presented at the 2008 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference, San Jose, CA.
- Wills, K. V., & Clerkin, T. A. (2009). Incorporating reflective practice into team simulation projects for improved learning outcomes. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 72, 221-227. doi: 10.1177/1080569909334559



### **Acknowledgment**

This study was conducted by Karen S. Olson, APR, department of communication, The College at Brockport, State University of New York. The author's colleagues at The College at Brockport who have participated in the simulations discussed in this article and the partnering support of journalism professors Michael Cavanagh, Marsha Ducey, and Richard Woodson for involving their students in these collaborative endeavors are gratefully acknowledged.

Correspondence concerning this article can be addressed to Karen S. Olson, Department of Communication, The College at Brockport, 350 New Campus Drive, Brockport, NY 14420 (e-mail: [ksolson@frontiernet.net](mailto:ksolson@frontiernet.net)).

---

**Karen S. Olson**, APR, is an assistant professor in the department of communication, The College at Brockport, State University of New York, where she teaches courses in public relations and writing. Her research is focused on experiential learning, service learning, and issues of diversity in schools and in the workplace. She is accredited in public relations (APR) and an active member of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), serving as a board member and chair of an award-winning Diversity Committee for the Rochester, New York, PRSA chapter.

---

Appendix A  
**Survey Questions Sent to Former Public Relations Students  
Who Participated in a Crisis Communications Simulation  
in 2007, 2008, or 2009**

---

1. Indicate the semester during which you took CMC 432: Public Relations Campaigns with Professor Olson:  
 Spring 2007 – Crisis Involving a Theatre Department  
 Spring 2008 – Crisis Involving a Recreation & Leisure Department  
 Spring 2009 – Crisis Involving an Athletic Department
  2. In general, what do you remember about the crisis simulation you took part in during CMC 432: Public Relations Campaigns?
  3. What were some of the specific things you remember doing during the crisis simulation?
  4. Thinking about your experience, could you have benefitted more from this activity in any way? If so, what could have been done differently to enhance or improve your experience?
  5. Since completing CMC 432, have you used anything you learned from taking part in a crisis simulation during that course?
  6. Based on your experience, would you recommend that this type of activity be continued in future public relations classes? Why or why not?
-