Infusing ethics into the undergraduate public relations curriculum

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Abstract

In response to reports of misconduct and unethical behaviour in the public relations profession and the increasingly insistent - and proper - demand that ethics be given an enhanced role in the public relations curriculum, this paper presents an action research approach to development, delivery and evaluation a module in ethics and professional responsibility for final year undergraduates in public relations. The key component of the project is a survey instrument which measures changes in the ethical sensitivity of students and showed that student attitudes changed in the short term on some issues such as lying to protect the client, and conflicts of loyalty, but not in others such as the desirability of doing pro bono work.

Key Words

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS, TEACHING BUSINESS ETHICS.
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Abstract

In response to reports of misconduct and unethical behaviour in the public relations profession and the increasingly insistent - and proper - demand that ethics be given an enhanced role in the public relations curriculum, this paper presents an action research approach to development, delivery and evaluation a module in ethics and professional responsibility for final year undergraduates in public relations. The key component of the project is a survey instrument which measures changes in the ethical sensitivity of students and showed that student attitudes changed in the short term on some issues such as lying to protect the client, and conflicts of loyalty, but not in others such as the desirability of doing pro bono work.

Key Words

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS, TEACHING BUSINESS ETHICS.
This paper describes an ongoing action research project on infusing ethics into the public relations curriculum at an Australian university business faculty over three semesters in 2000 and 2001. Action research is a qualitative research method which is both emergent and iterative. It is a cyclical or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection, in which clarification of the issues emerges more strongly as the cycle proceeds (Kemmis, 1997). In the specific context of applied ethics Jordan (1995, p.56) distinguishes between critical action research and participatory action research. This project is the former, in that the collaboration does not involve the students in proposing changes to the module, although it does involves collaboration between the two academic programs: public relations and applied ethics. Critical reflection was fostered by our reading of the literature, especially the literature on teaching and learning in business ethics, by ongoing discussions with colleagues, particularly those engaged in teaching education, and in teaching ethics, and by listening to the students as they reported their own responses to the scenarios we offered them.

The aims of this project are twofold. The first aim is to identify the level of ‘ethical sensitivity’ among undergraduate students studying public relations, and to find diagnostic instruments which are simple to administer, yet provide instructors with an adequate understanding of the students’ level of ethical awareness. The second aim is to find, define and then describe effective approaches to teaching and learning ethics in the public relations curriculum.
LITERATURE

There is a perennial debate in the literature on the question: can ethics be taught to adults? (De George, 1987; Parmental, 1989; Katz, 1990; Weber, 1990; Preston, 1992; Kjonstad and Wilmott 1995; McDonald and Donleavy, 1995; McKenna, 1995; Stevens, 1999). Sub-themes of this debate raise the following questions:

- What impact do ethics courses have on student behaviour?
- Should ethics courses - particularly business ethics courses - be taught to undergraduates who have little or no experience of business and the professions?

Some scholars have suggested that ethics courses may have little to no statistically significant impact on student attitudes (Bunke, 1988; Wynd and Mager, 1989). One reason given for this conclusion is that ethics can not be taught and that ethical attitudes rests on values that are generally developed over time and as a result of cultural, family and religious affiliations. A short ethics course they argue would therefore, have minimal impact on ethical values and attitudes.

Hanson (1987), Shenkir (1990), and Bishop (1992) refute the argument that values are determined early in life and that consequently ethics programs have little chance of effecting attitudinal change. They argue that a person’s value system is not static, nor does it contain a permanent set of values. Instead, it seems more likely that
a person’s value system is subject to continual modification through emotional, behavioural or cognitive interventions.

Carlson and Burke’s (1998) study shows that there are some effects of teaching ethics to adults, particularly with respect to increased analytical ability of students. In this study, students changed their reasoning from right/wrong to leadership responsibility. Students had begun to use analytical and conceptual skills to deal with the complexities of ethical dilemmas. By the end of the course they felt more comfortable with ambiguity, had developed an understanding of constraints as well as sensed the value of managing ethics to influence organisational culture.

Our definition of ‘ethical sensitivity’ is based on that of Collins (2000, p.6) which is “a person's (1) ability to recognize that a particular situation poses an ethical dilemma, (2) likelihood to do the right thing, and (3) intolerance toward unethical behaviours.” The approach we have taken is that our function is to develop students’ moral reasoning skills, not to indoctrinate them into particular notions of ethical behaviour, so that as practitioners, they have an enhanced capacity to make their own moral judgements. Whether those judgements are appropriate or not will be assessed by their peers and the community.

THE MODULE ON ‘ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY’

In response to the need for specific education and training in ethics within the undergraduate public relations curriculum, a learning module on ethics and
professional responsibility was developed within the final year subject on public relations campaigns. The module consisted of four hours of class contact over two successive weeks towards the end of the subject, around Weeks 9 and 10, of a 13 week semester. The module also required students to undertake some group work outside the class contact times.

The objectives of the module were written in both cognitive and affective terms (Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia, 1956). The following table contains our reading of the taxonomy of both domains, so the relationship between our objectives and the taxonomies, and the manner in which we have interwoven the objectives is clear.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COGNITIVE</th>
<th>AFFECTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Know</td>
<td>1. Receive: awareness, receptivity, and giving attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Comprehend</td>
<td>2. Respond: acceptance of moral responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Apply</td>
<td>3. Value: accepting and preferring a particular value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Analyse</td>
<td>4. Organise: conceptualizing values and determining the dominant values within a value set.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Synthesise</td>
<td>5. Generalise: integrating these values into a consistent set of behaviours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Evaluate</td>
<td>Not Applicable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the module objectives were:

To have the students:

1. *Know, comprehend and apply* the current Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) Code of Ethics, and the ethical theories of deontology, consequentialism and virtue;
2. Be *aware of and respond* to ethical ambiguity;
3. *Analyse* a scenario containing ethical ambiguity and *evaluate* a range of alternative actions to resolve the ambiguity by *expressing a preference for a particular value*. 
The first objective is cognitive; the second affective, the third seeks to bring both cognitive and affective domains together. It was, we felt, unrealistic to expect students to move beyond the third level of the affective domain taxonomy in the short amount of time given to delivery of the module. The extent to which students have expressed a particular value can be determined from their oral presentations and their post test survey responses.

GENDER AND AGE OF THE COHORTS

The public relations profession is predominantly female. This is not only an Australian phenomenon (Singh and Smyth, 2001), but a global phenomenon (Farmer and Waugh, 1999) and this is reflected in the demographic composition of the cohorts. 

Cohort 1: In this cohort 72% of this student body were female; 14% were male and 14% did not respond to the question. 4% were aged 15-19, 70% were aged 20-24, 4% aged 25-29 and 4% aged 30-34, while 11% did not respond to the question. Cohort 2: This was a slightly older class, timetabled in the evening and attracting part time mature age students, 86% of whom were female and 14% male. None were aged 15-19, 64% were aged 20-24, 18% aged 25-29 and 18% aged 30-34. Cohort 3: The vast majority of the third cohort were females ages between 20 and 24 (78%); 3% were aged 15-19, 11% aged 25-29 and 8% aged 30-34. None were older than 34. In the third cohort 78% of this student body were female; 22% were male.

THE FIRST ITERATION
In the first iteration, the module consisted of a number of components in the following order:

- a pre and post test of moral judgement,
- a 20-30 minute lecture on ethical theory, codes and decision making,
- small group analysis of a scenario,
- small group presentations of that analysis,
- comment on the presentations by an expert panel, and
- incorporation of ethical reflection into the major public relations campaigns assignment.

**PRE-TEST MORAL REASONING SKILLS USING THE DEFINING ISSUES TEST**

The purpose of pre and post testing was to measure the extent to which moral development had occurred as a result of student participation in the module. The most reliable way of achieving this seemed to be to administer a standardised moral judgement test. Moral judgement tests, such as the Defining Issues Test (DIT) developed by James Rest in 1976 (Rest, 1979; Rest, 1986; Rest and Narvaez, 1998) and the Moral Judgement Test (MJT) developed around the same time by Georg Lind (1985) test attitudes towards ethical dilemmas as an indicator of behaviour. But such tests are problematic.

First, the DIT and the MJT are based on Kohlberg’s (1976) structure of moral development: the three levels of preconventional, conventional and post conventional morality, which has been criticised on a number of grounds (Cohen, Pant and Sharp, 1993; Hansen, 1992; Reidenbach and Robin, 1988; Jensen, Taylor and Burton, 1981).

Secondly, Kohlberg, and the tests derived from his taxonomy, are measuring moral judgement not moral behaviour. Essentially, they are about what respondents
say they would do, not what respondents actually do. There is a sense in which such
tests beg the question: how can we assess what respondents actually do? Nonetheless,
aware of these deficiencies, we proceeded to administer the DIT at the
commencement and conclusion of the first iteration.

**MINI-LECTURE ON ETHICAL CODES AND DECISION MAKING (20-30 MINUTES)**

Most students had previously completed a compulsory subject in business ethics as part of the business degree. In that subject, which could be considered to be a classical business ethics subject (Goodpaster, 1997), students were exposed to the ethical theories of deontology, consequentialism and virtue, to ethical codes and ethical decision making models as described in Harrison (2001). The purpose of this mini-lecture was to refresh the student’s understanding of this material, and to draw specific attention to the details of the Public Relations Institute of Australia Code of Ethics.

**SCENARIO ANALYSIS**

Following this presentation, students were presented with one of four scenarios, each described in the appendix. There is an extensive literature on the use of both cases and scenarios in teaching business and professional ethics (Collins, 2000, Burton, Johnson and Wilson, 1991). This project used scenarios, which we differentiate from case studies. Scenarios are fictionalised accounts of a series of events, often based on a variety of real life occurrences, which draw together a range
TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS ETHICS

of issues in one concise and coherent narrative. The scenarios were drafted to reflect a variety of workplace contexts and a variety of ethical issues. Students were instructed as follows:

For each of the scenario, you need to:
- identify the relevant issue
- identify the relevant stakeholders
- consider your options in terms of particular courses of action
- outline the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action
- consider how the PRIA Code of Ethics may inform your decision-making
- make a recommendation on a course of action

PEER LED GROUP DISCUSSION

Mindful of Nelson & Ondeki’s (1990) conclusion that the most effective learning about ethics occurs through peer led discussion, the key learning activity was a small group discussion, in which each group dissected one of the four scenarios. Students in this subject were already working in small groups of four or five on a specific public relations campaign project. Each of these groups was assigned a scenario to discuss and present in the following week. The group discussion was commenced in the classroom so students could seek guidance. Academic staff did not monitor the group, but left it to the group to initiate any call for assistance.
SMALL GROUP PRESENTATIONS

The following week, each group was required to make a brief (7-10 minute) oral presentation responding to the six questions raised.

COMMENTARY ON THE STUDENT PRESENTATIONS BY AN EXPERT PANEL

After each student group presented, all members of an expert panel were invited to comment briefly on the student analysis of the scenarios. The panel consisted of:

- A senior industry practitioner.
- A public relations academic with significant industry experience, and the then chair of the state industry association.
- A second public relations academic with significant industry experience.
- A business ethics academic with professional experience in corporate communications.

This provided an opportunity to correct any misapprehensions students may have, to allow them to hear some ‘real world’ analysis of the scenarios, and to consolidate their learning.

POST TEST: THE DEFINING ISSUES TEST

Upon completion of the presentations and panel comments, the DIT was again administered to students. Our experience of using the DIT was that despite its claims not be culturally bound, it was quite culture specific, even to the extent that the sample test item given to students to prepare them for the test was about a US
Presidential election! Our second difficulty with the test was the complexity and design of the response form. This made it difficult for students to follow. The third problem we encountered was the time taken to administer the test. It took students up to 45 minutes to complete, and given that we had only allocated a total of four hours of class contact for the module, to lose up to one and a half hours on pre and post testing caused us to question whether in the remaining two and a half hours we would register any changes.

**INCORPORATION OF ETHICAL REFLECTION INTO SUBJECT ASSESSMENT CRITERIA**

The final task was for students to offer some reflection on any ethical issues that emerged during the course of their major assessment task for the subject, which was a public relations campaign. This written reflection was incorporated into the other self assessment activities prepared as part of the assignment.

**THE SECOND ITERATION**

The second iteration took place in the following year. The structure of the module remained unchanged from the first iteration. What did change were the instruments used for pre and post testing students.

**PRE TEST AND POST TEST: QUESTIONNAIRE**
Given our dissatisfaction with the DIT, we devised our own eight item questionnaire which asked students to respond to a series of propositions on a five point Likert-type scale: Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The propositions were drawn from the instructors’ knowledge of the types of issues reported in both the media and the academic literature and our knowledge – from professional experience – of the types of ethical issues which emerge in professional practice. The propositions covered five key areas:

(a) some general assertions about the place of ethical behaviour and codes of ethics in professional public relations practice.
(b) the duty of the public relations practitioner in relation to the client, the employer, other professions and the public interest.
(c) offering of gifts and benefits to potential clients.
(d) withholding of information, lying and the public correction of errors.
(e) *pro bono* work.

**SURVEY RESULTS**

The cohort in the second iteration was quite small and we were only able to gain twelve usable surveys from the pre test and twenty from the post test, which gave us indicative information only, and we have not reported it here. The responses were generally consistent with those obtained in the third iteration. Given that the unit had an enrolment of thirty five students, and only eleven attended the first session of the two session module, it is possible that students indicated their attitudes towards the
issue of ethics and professional responsibility by voting with their feet. Essentially, this iteration provided us with the opportunity to road test the survey instrument.

**THE THIRD ITERATION**

In this third cohort, 88% has completed the compulsory unit in business ethics, 12% had not. To improve student participation, attendance at the module was made mandatory.

**PRE AND POST TEST SURVEY**

The survey instrument was refined by the addition of a further seven questions. We added questions about the correction of errors, lying, gifts to potential clients, comparative loyalty conflicts of consultants and in house practitioners, and the role of continuing professional education in fostering an ethical climate in the industry (Q4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15).

**PRE AND POST TEST: SCENARIO**

In addition to the survey material described above, we attempted to gain qualitative data on the ethical sensitivity of students through a scenario we devised. In developing this scenario we were guided somewhat by the work of Sparkes and Hunt (1998), and by the further application of that work reported by Sparkes and Merenski (2000). In particular, like Sparkes and Merenski (2000, p.368), we did not prompt respondents to look for any particular types of issues. Recognising the changing
nature of the persuasive communication disciplines, and in particular the emergence of integrated marketing communication, the scenario was written in such a way that it could also be administered to advertising and Integrated Marketing Communication students as well as public relations students for the purpose of cross disciplinary analysis. The administration of this instrument was time consuming, and so it was not used as a post test in this third iteration and is not reported here.
## SURVEY RESULTS

### TABLE 2. ISSUES IN PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. PR practitioners should be ethical because “good ethics is good business”, in that being ethical contributes to the bottom line.

2. Being ethical is important because ‘doing the right thing’ is one of the foundation principles of both business and society in a market economy.

3. It is acceptable professional practice for PR practitioners to keep information which is damaging to a client/employer out of the public domain.

4. It is NOT necessary for PR practitioners to publicly correct errors or mistakes made by the practitioner which make their way into the public domain.

5. It is NOT necessary for PR practitioners to publicly correct errors or mistakes made by the client which make their way into the public domain.

6. A code of professional ethics is the best way to ensure ethical behavior among PR practitioners.*

7. The primary responsibility of a PR practitioner is to their client/employer even if this conflicts with the public interest.*
8. As a PR practitioner, it is acceptable professional practice to tell lies to protect the interests of your client or employer.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
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<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
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<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. It is acceptable professional practice for consultancies to provide gifts and entertainment for potential clients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. It is acceptable professional practice for consultancies to provide gifts and entertainment for potential government clients.

     AGREE  | KNOW  | DISAGREE
Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST  | 5      | 16   | 21   | 42   | 16   |
Final Year PR UG POST TEST   | 2      | 21   | 14   | 46   | 17   |

11. PR practitioners should ensure that their personal principles never override their responsibility to secure a satisfactory outcome for their client/employer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
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<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. In house practitioners owe a stronger duty to their organisation than consultants do to their client.

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<tr>
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<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. PR practitioners have a professional responsibility to undertake advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged and voiceless groups in the community without expectation of payment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
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<th>AGREE</th>
<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
<th>DISAGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>32</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Any conduct by a PR practitioner which is sanctioned by another professional, such as a lawyer or accountant is permissible and justifiable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
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<th>DON'T KNOW</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Continuing professional education in ethics is the best way to ensure ethical behaviour among PR practitioners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COHORT</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
<th>AGREE</th>
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<td>Final Year PR UG: PRE TEST</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Year PR UG POST TEST</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

Question 1: Responses to Question 1 reported no change in attitudes towards the proposition that *PR practitioners should be ethical because being ethical contributes to the bottom line* with 76% in agreement or strong agreement in both pre and post test with don’t knows remaining consistent at 5%.

Question 2: Between the pre and post test there was a 7% drop in the number of respondents agreeing/strongly agreeing with the proposition that *being ethical was important because 'doing the right thing' is one of the foundation principles of both business and society in a market economy* and an increase of 7% in the number disagreeing/strongly disagreeing.

Question 3: Between the pre and post test there was a significant increase in the number of respondents disagreeing and strongly disagreeing with the proposition that *it is acceptable professional practice for PR practitioners to keep information which is damaging to a client/employer out of the public domain*. In the pre-test the 60% who agreed or strongly agreed became a 55% majority disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, an increase of 26% from the pre-test. 28% still agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition, but only 2% of them strongly disagreed rose by 7%. The don’t knows remained consistent at 16% in the pre-test and 17% in the post-test.

Question 4: There was little change in the broad response to the proposition that *it is not necessary for practitioners to correct errors they made which made it
into the public domain. 84% disagreed or strongly disagreed in the pre-test, and 86% maintained that view in the post test. However the number who strongly agreed rose by 13% from 16% to 29% with a slight increase from 5 % to 7% in those who agreed. Don’t knows dropped from 11% to 7%

Question 5: This proposition which varies little from the previous proposition except the focus is on an error made by the client rather than the practitioner, In response to this question 90% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed in the pre-test, but only 76% in the post test, a drop of 14% while the number agreeing rose by 9% from 5 % in the pre-test to 14% in the post test. The don’t knows doubled from 5% to 10%.

Question 6: The proposition that a code of professional ethics is the best way to ensure ethical behavior among pr practitioners was agreed to or strongly agreed to by 68% of respondents and rejected by 24% in the pre test. In the post test 41% disagreed or strongly disagreed, while only 45% continued to agree or strongly agree, a 23% decline in support for the proposition. The number strongly agreeing declined from 18% to 14%. The don’t knows increased from 8% to 14%. While in terms of the goals of the project, this may seem to be an anomalous result, it is not. As reflected in the literature (Wright, 1993; Longstaff, 1994; de Maria, 1999; Laufer and Robertson, 1997; Maguire, 1999; Schwartz, 2000), the weakness of self regulatory codes, and the need for the values expressed in codes to be internalized and operationalised rather than simply complied with, was the subject of extensive discussion.
Question 7: The proposition that the primary responsibility of a PR practitioner is to their client/employer even if this conflicts with the public interest was strongly challenged in the module. It was argued that a profession, which public relations purports to be is characterised by those who act first and foremost in the service of the community (Ladd, 1997). The literature on conflict of loyalties (Parsons, 1993; Mason and Mudrack, 1997) suggests that those with a higher (Kohlbergian) level of moral reasoning skills are more likely to experience such conflicts. The corollary of this is that when moral reasoning skills are enhanced by educational interventions, then higher level of loyalty conflict might be expected.

Thus, in the pre test 25% agreed or strongly agreed, 46% agreed or strongly disagreed, while 29% did not know, one of the high percentages of don’t knows in the survey. In the post test those disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the proposition rose by 30% to 76%, with the don’t knows decreasing to 7% from 29%. Those agreeing or strongly disagreeing dropped from 25% to 17%. So responses to this proposition changed significantly.

Question 8: This proposition that, as a PR practitioner, it is acceptable professional practice tell lies to protect the interests of your client or employer is a development of propositions 4 and 5 about the correction of errors, which was a key issue in scenario 3. There was little change from the pre test to post test with 91% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly in the pre-test, and 90% in the post test. In the post test, however, the vehemence with which this view was supported jumped by 14% with the percentage of those strongly agreeing moving from 26% to 40% of the total
cohort. Of course the only caveat is that this is people reporting how they would behave, not actual behaviour.

Question 9. This is the first of two questions about gifts and benefits. The proposition is that *it is acceptable professional practice for consultancies to provide gifts and entertainment for potential clients*. In the pre-test, respondents were almost evenly split between those who agreed (31%, 13% strongly), those who disagreed (37%), and the don’t knows (32%). In the post test, the number who disagreed with the practice diminished to 23%, while the number supporting it was 63%. The don’t knows decreased by over half to 14%. The usefulness of discussion in the clarification of values is demonstrated by the decrease in the don’t know column.

Question 10. It was pointed out that while gifts, benefits and hospitality might be a universal lubricant of business in the private sector, the public sector operates under different standards. The proposition *that it is acceptable professional practice for consultancies to provide gifts and entertainment for potential government clients* was addressed in scenario 1. In the pre-test 21% agreed or strongly agreed the practice was acceptable, while the same number did not know, while 58% disagreed, including 16% strongly. In the post test the don’t knows dropped by 7%, and those who disagreed increased slightly to 63%, 17% of them strongly. Over one third, some 37% of respondents still think it is acceptable to provide gifts to potential government clients.
Question 11. This question put the proposition that PR practitioners should ensure that their personal principles never override their responsibility to secure a satisfactory outcome for their client/employer and explores the relationship of duty to oneself and duty to one’s employer, which can be the source of significant ethical conflict for individuals. The question was also designed to address the notion that “the client is always right”, which abrogates the need for the individual practitioner to exercise independent moral judgement. The Timberlands case in New Zealand, where two Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) members from Weber Shandwick were the subject of a convoluted ethics inquiry, is a classic example of this phenomenon (Hager and Burton, 1999 Espiner, G. (2000a, 2000b). 34% of respondents agreed (including 5% strongly) with the proposition in the pre-test, and 55% disagreed (including 11% strongly). Subsequently, those who disagreed or strongly disagreed rose by 17%, with a corresponding drop among those who agreed or strongly agreed. In the post test the number of don’t knows increased slightly from 11% to 12%. Again, some measurable change in attitudes took place.

Question 12. The proposition was that in house practitioners owe a stronger duty to their organization than consultants do to their client. This is a question designed to probe the issue of organizational loyalty and the need for the practitioner, irrespective of their workplace, to exercise independent moral judgement. There was no change between the pre and post test with 78% disagreeing, 17% strongly in the pre test, 18% in the post test. Don’t knows declined slightly from 11% to 10%. This is possibly a question which could be deleted in a future iteration.
Question 13. This question put the proposition that *PR practitioners have a professional responsibility to undertake advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged and voiceless groups in the community without expectation of payment.* This is based on the principle that one of the characteristics of a profession is the willingness of its members to work *pro bono* although the proposition stated here suggests more than just *pro bono* work. Ferre (1993) reported a high level of *pro bono* work among US practitioners, and while notions of philanthropic activity are more strongly grounded in the US culture, there is no reason to doubt that Australian practitioners also undertake a significant amount of *pro bono* work.

The majority of student respondents (54%) rejected the proposition in the pretest, rising to 57% in the post test. Only 14% agreed with the proposition, none of them strongly, and this declined slightly to 12% in the post test. In the largest number of don’t knows in this survey, 32% said don’t know in the pretest, and 31% in the post test. The results indicate a slight hardening of previously held attitudes between the pre and post test. The results also indicate that up to 85% of these students are unlikely to meet the university and business faculty graduate attributes relating to a commitment to social justice.

Question 14. Like question 11, this proposition is designed to explore the issue of the practitioner making their own independent professional and ethical judgements. The proposition is that *any conduct by a PR practitioner which is sanctioned by another professional, such as a lawyer or accountant is permissible and justifiable.* The large number of don’t knows in this question, which are consistent across the pre
and post test suggest that this remains an unresolved issue for many respondents. In the pre test 16% agreed with the proposition, none strongly, rising to 20% in the post test. Those disagreeing in the pre-test 58% (21% of those strongly), dropped to 55% in the post test, with only 5% holding their view strongly, a decline of 15%. This adds further weight to the suggestion that this is a complex, potentially unresolved issue for many.

Question 15. Continuing professional education in ethics is the best way to ensure ethical behaviour among PR practitioners is the proposition put in this question. In the pre test 76% supported this proposition, rising to 78% in the post test. These responses need to be compared with Question 6 which put the proposition that a code is the best means of ensuring ethical behaviour and which saw a 23% decline in support for the proposition between the pre test and the post test.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the outcomes are mixed, and in the short term some measurable attitude change has been achieved at several key points. On a small number of propositions there was significant change. On the question of the acceptability of keeping damaging information out of the public domain (Q3) respondents changed their views markedly from opposing disclosure (60%) to supporting it (55%). Similarly on the related question of conflict between the client or employer and the public interest (Q7), there was a complete change of attitude with greater recognition of the importance of the public interest from 46% to 76%.
There were also some disappointing consistencies. Only 14% of respondents supported the imperative of *pro bono* work. After the module this dropped to 12% with opposition to *pro bono* work ranging from 54% to 57%. This indicates that while some notions of ethical conduct and professionalism have been learned, some dimensions are still missing. In methodological terms, some work remains to be done on the survey instrument, and a several questions have been identified in the discussion as possibilities for deletion.

As expected the second iteration left us with further questions for research:

- ✗ accurately measure gender differences? Given the widespread recognition Does the socialisation into the profession that occurs at university, particularly with a stress of needing to be ‘client-focused’, lead students to ignore the important questions of community service and the public interest. To put it bluntly are students more unethical at the end of their course than the beginning?

- ✗ How do we that there are gender differences in moral development, how can we account for these in our evaluation of this intervention?

- ✗ How can the objectives of the module be set so they both align with and meet the institution’s stated generic graduate attributes? The statement of generic attributes to be possessed by graduates of this particular institution states in part:
Every ...course aims to develop graduates who are able to demonstrate... social and ethical responsibility and an understanding of indigenous and international perspectives encompassing...

- recognition and appreciation of gender, culture and customs in personal and community relations

- valuing and promoting truth, accuracy, honesty, accountability and the code of practice relevant to the discipline or professional area

(Reference identifying institution to be inserted here).

Finally, there is no definition or discussion in this module of what constitutes ‘a profession’, and to explore the question: to what extent is public relations a craft, a trade, a business, a profession, is an obvious inclusion in a future iteration.

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