Leah Rea
Intro to PR
Course Reflection
Due Date: 02/05/2015

**‘Everything you do and say is PR’: my reflection on PR205**

The study of Public Relations (hereafter referred to as ‘PR’) this semester has proven to be highly interesting, enlightening and beneficial. I know that I was correct in selecting the course as my elective this semester, as I have thoroughly enjoyed this field of study and I feel that I have gained in knowledge and understanding whilst also acquiring new skills from completing the various practical assignments. Whilst I cannot believe that this reflection signifies the conclusion of the course entire, its purpose shall be for myself to engage in a discussion and reaction of the course, including my learning throughout the year, a focus on a particular topic taught within the course and my feelings in general regarding acquired knowledge from the course.

I would like to take this opportunity to note the importance and value to be gained from undertaking a reflective paper. It allows for an evaluative and critical assessment of both the course and your participation in same; you simply do not end the course but in fact are compelled to consider all the topics which have been examined in class, your participation and also class discussions. It is important to be able to discuss the knowledge acquired, understanding gained and own personal performance in assignments because we are life-long learners. We need to consider what we have learned for it to be effective, i.e. for us to use our acquired knowledge and skills in a practical manner in the future. In addition, from a personal perspective I know that I am neither a perfect student nor individual in general. I aspire to do my best, especially in areas which I find interesting and enjoyable, and consider myself quite the perfectionist. However I must realise that there will naturally be areas I can and will excel in, and areas which I will have weaknesses and/or opportunities for growth and improvement. Undertaking a reflective paper therefore enables me to assess with a critical eye not only the skills I have acquired, but the effectiveness in which I have used them in practical application via the required class assignments, as well as consider my overall knowledge and understanding. In this, taking a moment to reflect and evaluate is invaluable.

I also consider a reflective paper to be important because –to myself at least – it illustrates the objective of a liberal arts education. A liberal arts education is not intended to train the student for a specific job – it prepares that student for the world of work by providing an invaluable set of employability skills, including the ability to think for yourself, the skills to communicate effectively, and the capacity for lifelong learning. It demonstrates that all fields of education and academia are interrelated and have practical application and relevance. For example, I studied a Marketing course this year prior to undertaking my studies in PR and I could see links and connections such as the topic of branding and engaging with audiences that otherwise I could not have seen, had I not been in a liberal arts educational environment. I would not be able to fully recognise such connections if I did not actually think about the knowledge I had acquired via a reflective means. Therefore I consider a reflective paper to be its own little slice of liberal arts education.

I will now discuss my learning throughout the course, considering the history and development of PR and how we as a class studied and discussed this development.

*From the classroom, to Moodle: my voyage of PR discovery*

Learning about the historical background to PR, its development and modern use was fascinating. It is at once both a simple and complex ‘art form’, ranging from being the practice of creating and maintaining positive, beneficial relations by communication to considering how it is utilised more specifically in politics, business and organisations in general. I had been aware of some background to PR and its historical development but I was intrigued to focus on the American evolution and present-day use, as there are marked differences in the use of PR both in the US and in the UK – most noticeably in the political sphere. I believe that ultimately the main takeaway I will have from this area is that public relations is both the heart of and influenced by our everyday actions, and social media platforms are widely becoming the new norm to promote and maintain PR relations.

I believe the first week of the course focused on an important aspect of PR, that of the essential link between communications and relations. Public Relations is not simply the art of ‘spin’ but rather it is of communication information using a carefully constructed message delivery strategy and if successful, it will be readily accepted by the audience. PR therefore is the unique combination of sociology, communication and psychology. It requires the acknowledgement of the importance of human behaviour and therefore the understanding of how such behaviour can be influenced or indeed manipulated. You must know your audience, their thoughts, needs and fears to be able to effectively and successfully communicate your message to them. This would explain why communication crises can have such a detrimental impact on an organisation or business. This is because good relationships require good communications, especially in relation to consumers and companies. To demonstrate PR via a marketing perspective for example, should a company be negatively portrayed in the media due to a revelation about its offered products for example, its loyal customers would feel betrayed, believing that the company has broken a promise or violated that key ‘contract’ between company and customer. The brand name could become compromised, sales suffer and the profit of the company decline as a result.

I feel that studying the role of Bernays in the development and recognition of PR was beneficial, even though I did not always readily agree with his propositions. His importance in the field is undeniable and his ‘Engineering of Consent’ theory whereby an intellectual minority manipulates the masses to fulfil agendas is evidently a theory practiced today. I believe Ewen’s description of Bernays as the ‘farsighted architect of modern propaganda techniques’ clearly rings true, when considering the importance he placed on symbolism as he understood the power of visual messages as a means of conveying important messages. Successful communication does not require the use of actual words, sometimes visual messages can be more powerful and can connect easier with the audience, striking up a trusting relationship ripe for continuing and successful PR. This can be demonstrated through his persuading women’s rights activists in New York City during the 1920s to hold a particular brand of cigarettes to act as ‘torches of freedom’. This episode also captures the practical application of Bernays’ own theory; he was able to manipulate the masses through the association of cigarettes with social activism which benefitted the cigarette manufacturer he was employed by. Thus, the marriage of corporate sales, powerful and emotive imagery and language and the link with popular social causes was created and has endured ever since, most commonly found in television advertisements. It was interesting to watch the film ‘Thank You for Smoking’ in class and see how symbolism, emotive and persuasive language can readily encourage the general public to buy anything – even when they surely know that cigarettes for example do kill.

I was most captivated by the video documentary on the historical development of PR shown during class. Quite simply, I do not even know where to begin with reflecting upon it. I recall feeling a sense of hopelessness because it appears that as anything and everything is PR and can be tailored to suit your agenda, no matter how long it takes, you can seemingly retain or maintain the support of the general public. The phrase used at the beginning of the documentary ‘constant drama of persuasion’ is very apt. This is best demonstrated when examining the case of the ‘Ludlow Massacre’ of the striking Colorado miners. In the immediate aftermath, Rockefeller Junior was subject to protests, mass complaints and negative publicity. This resulted in a PR crisis for the Rockefeller business empire and reputable name, as it seemed the relationship between them and the general public had been irrevocably damaged. However, Ivy Lee, the man who promoted PR as being the ‘art of being believed’ expertly navigated the Rockefellers through this difficult time. By simply dehumanising the strikers, portraying them as ungrateful and troublesome and in a true stroke of PR genius, having front-page photographs of Rockefeller Junior speak to miners and their families as a man of the people, Lee managed to not only salvage the name, but increase the endurance of the family’s reputation. It all came down to changing the public perception of the Rockefellers, whether portraying Rockefeller Junior as a man of the people or his father as a generous philanthropist. To me, this is evidence of the validity of Bernays’ principle of the ‘engineering of consent’ for the general public in this case was so readily manipulated and their opinion influenced in order to gain their support.

Lastly, the role played by the CPI during the First World War is important to me due to it being an early example of propaganda, which continues to be used –and believed – today. The CPI utilised propaganda as a powerful tool in disseminating their idea of ‘truth’ regarding America’s involvement in the war. By resorting to a widespread communications campaign, encompassing media and cinema, the CPI generated positive publicity and effectively standardised the perception of the general public to the war through subtle control and subliminal messaging. It really is a masterclass in PR, as then-Presidetl Wilson had been elected on the basis of ensuring America would not become embroiled in the European war and yet despite the fact he could have been branded a hypocrite and contradictory, the skillful work exercised by the CPI ensured America was whipped into a state of passionate patriotism to support the war and fight to ensure the safety of democracy. This is all the more impressive as workers especially had originally viewed the war as merely a rich man’s war’ and as an attempt by these rich men to recover endangered loans. Again, Bernays’ ‘Engineering of Consent’ principle is evident here. The input of Arthur Bullard at this time demonstrates how the understanding of public opinion had increased; Bullard arguing it was a ‘moral disinfectant’ and reflected the public’s desire for open transparency. He warned that should the government implement any obvious policy of censorship, the public would not be receptive and instead their distrust of public officials would merely increase, something not needed during wartime. The government needed to follow a policy of mass flooding of publicity, to thoroughly saturate the public with the truth of their actions. Bullard submitted that such an action was essential, because to garner the interest of the public in military involvement, the public needed to be kept informed as much as possible. I could not help but drawn a parallel to the use of publicity and communication -as written about by Torie Clarke - in both the US and the UK following the decision to invade Iraq as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks: the public on both sides of the Atlantic were inundated with publicity, but it was merely an exercise in propaganda. Even to this day, we cannot be entirely sure as to how prevalent the truth was in governmental communications. The use of propaganda and carefully crafted and staged communications was evident in the film ‘Wag the Dog’. I thought it was interesting to consider the promotion and PR undertaken in the film to ensure the re-election of an incumbent to post; the idea of ‘never change horses’ or ‘always pick a winner’ are persuasive and memorable slogans which tie neatly with the traditional US outlook of competition and the need to win. The use of rampant manipulation and the obvious gulf between perception and reality (as indicated by Lippmann) was aptly demonstrated in the film as the characters sought to prevent a PR communications crisis. The use of visual images and also passionate, emotional and ‘catchy’ songs was heavily indicated and their success in persuasion and manipulation of the public well-documented; especially true in the case of the photograph of ‘good ol’ Shoe’ with his jumper torn to replicate the Morse Code for ‘courage, mum’. The role of the CPI and the film both suggest that in order for propaganda to be successful, it needs to be consistent and saturate completely across all mediums; there can be no cracks in the façade.

*Areas of Weakness/Opportunities for Improvement discovered in the course*

I feel that this course has helped me enhance skills I already possessed but also acquire news skills. Furthermore, I feel that it has been useful in allowing me to realise areas of improvement that I can focus on in the future.

I feel that I have demonstrated strengths in key skills such as research, participation, discussion, suitable writing style, timeliness and adherence to deadlines. These skills were evident in my completed assignments and willingness to participate and engage in class.

Regarding areas of improvement, I feel that I learned a great deal from the welcome constructive criticism I received from both my Professor and my class. I have learnt the importance of adapting my speech to my audience, the need to consider the pacing of my speech and adapting my word usage accordingly e.g. refraining from using words or phrases that would be unfamiliar with my audience. I feel that with these points, I can improve upon areas such as presenting and recording audio files. I know now the areas of weakness in my Podcast assignment in terms of needing to slow down and the need for more careful sound editing. In relation to my speech writing assignment, I am now aware of ensuring I understand that everyone has their own mannerisms and patterns of speech and I cannot assume my own speaking style is suitable for others. Again, this emphasises the importance of understanding both audience needs and speaker requirements to satisfy those needs and therefore effectively and successfully delver their message.

*Area of focus: Speech-Writing assignment*

I opted to discuss this area of the course as it was something that I did not realise I would enjoy so thoroughly, which surprised me somewhat. I enjoyed the research undertaken in terms of coming to understand what makes a ‘good’ speech and the audio clips of famous speeches such as MLK Junior’s ‘I have a dream’ speech. In addition, I enjoyed undertaking the research required to write the speech on the chosen topic of childhood obesity in Iowa and I liked having the opportunity to interview the ‘speaker’ to discover her thought s on the subject and ascertain her rhythm of speech, tone, etc.

I discovered that a speech should be effective in that you successfully convey your message to the audience who can relate to it and are moved by it. A successfully-delivered speech will inform your audience in a clear and informative manner, it will be delivered in language that is understandable to the audience and will not be condescending. This ensures the audience will be open to your ideas, that they will accept the speaker as they are and relate to them – therefore it is vital to be aware of the needs and concerns of the audience so as to be able to accurately ‘target’ them and so essentially exploit such needs to effectively communicate the message of the speech and therefore influence the thoughts and behaviours of the audience with the power of your words. A speech which is not concise, clear, informative or is in fact dismissive of the audience or patronising risks alienating the audience, resulting in the rejection of the speech and therefore the message itself.

It is of vital importance that you as the writer of the speech actually know the speaker. You must ensure that you discuss the speech, its objectives and goals with the speaker and know their own opinion on the matter. If they are to deliver a passionate speech, you must understand the reasons for their passion and successfully convey this in the speech itself. You are also supposed to be aware of their mannerisms and own way of speaking and ensure you have this in mind when writing. The speaker themselves must be able to relate to the speech, otherwise they cannot deliver it. This crafting of a relationship between yourself as the writer and the speaker as the deliverer of the speech is essential as it is a stepping stone of sorts towards crafting relations with the audience also.

I also have realised the importance of timing in terms of delivery of sentences contained within the speech and to be aware of both time and word restrictions. A speech that is too long most likely lacks structure and focus, will sound dull and lifeless to the audience who will lose interest and therefore reject the message of the speech. Also, a speech that is too short will not be as informative as needed and thus the audience will not be persuaded as successfully as they would be, had enough information been present. This will most likely be due to a lack of thorough research and preparation prior to writing the speech – it is the responsibility of the speech writer to be as informed as possible, otherwise they cannot inform others.

Furthermore, I understand that a speech must be memorable if it is to be persuasive. It must be poignant, must stick out in the minds of the audience and trigger their emotions if it is to successfully influence their thoughts and therefore behaviours. This can be achieved not only through the choice of words and the delivery of same, but also by visual means, such as hand gestures to illustrate points and passion more powerfully. Body language can also help deliver the message of the speech, as too can the utilising of voice inflections. You must capture and maintain the interest of the audience for the duration of the speech, thus you must be aware of different ways to do so and not simply reply on voice alone but by visually eye-catching methods as well.

*Final Thoughts*

This class offered the opportunity to essentially ‘open my eyes’ to the world around me and understand the constant messages that I am subjected to on a daily basis from politicians, businesses, etc. I find that I now scrutinise advertisements that I see, considering the use of imagery and/or script, or I listen closely to a politician’s speech and wonder how many times a writer had to work on drafts until the language was just right and the message could be strongly delivered. These are the benefits of such a practical and discursive-based class: you do not simply attend class and then leave, but you actually learn and suddenly have this desire to understand more and put such learning into practical application.

I feel that this course reiterates the importance of understanding historical context and the significance of development over time. Too many times have people dismissed history as ‘irrelevant’. This could not be farther from the truth – we learn from history, and the field of PR most certainly has too. The understanding of human behaviour has increased and so too has the use of visual imagery, emotive language, and now social media. All this derives from the development of PR, which can only development through examining and assessing its history.

I feel that I have been enlightened by this course, from the topics covered and the discussions in class. I greatly enjoyed discussing and sharing my thoughts and opinions with my peers; such discussions enabled me to learn more about my fellow students and develop relations with them – highlighting how PR essentially is present in everything that we do or say. I only wish that I could have the opportunity to continue to study the field of PR and perhaps take a closer look into the world of journalism.