

Chapter 15

Media Effects: E-Simulations and Authentic “Blended” Learning

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ABSTRACT

Public Relations (PR) is an occupation through which public identities and realities can be constructed and manipulated. Thus, understanding the implications for ethical practice, especially in light of rapid developments in social media and new digital technologies, is increasingly relevant. However, conventional approaches to the teaching of public relations tend to emphasize practice and knowledge of occupational tools, over deeper reflection in areas such as the social effects and ethics. This chapter explores an e-simulation used in the public relations program at Deakin University, which aspires to develop higher ethical dispositions in students and canvasses what this means at a societal, practitioner, and industry level.

INTRODUCTION

Commitment to online learning in Australian universities continues to grow and with this are higher expectations for *integrity*. In relation to online learning, Palmer, White, and Holt (2007, p.1) define integrity as “encompassing three principles relating to teaching online: coherence, commit-

ment, and competence. By implication, it suggests a new meaning in acting honestly or authentically in relation to one’s teaching values and beliefs in online environments.” E-simulations are one such online learning technology that has potential for *integrity* and *authenticity* and by extension can be used to develop higher order learning. This potentiality is significant especially in relation to

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the powerful critique that “the ubiquitous presence of technology in schools impacts deleteriously on principles of democratic learning by promoting instrumental rationality, or uncritical means/end reasoning” (Hyslop-Margison, 2004, p. 138). Indeed, Hyslop-Margison argues that other concerns focus on the possibility “that technology inevitably reduces classroom instruction to simple information transfer, or instrumental learning, rather than fostering the critical dispositions and creative capacities necessary for meaningful democratic citizenship” (p. *). The purpose of this chapter is to show how e-simulations, combined with face-to-face and online teaching, can be used to promote both integrity and higher order learning in a discipline area which has a predilection for instrumentalism. Firstly the chapter will show why there is a need for a new paradigm in public relations curriculum development. Secondly, it will show how diverse pedagogies can be applied in public relations, but will also discuss their limitations. Finally, it will describe the e-simulation ‘PPressure Point!’ and show how students have responded to it, at the same time discussing the importance of contextualising information and communications technology (ICT) more broadly in the curriculum and flagging some new directions for future development.

“PPressure Point!” is used for large student cohorts in an undergraduate Arts program and is embedded with ambitious pedagogical objectives, beyond just skills acquisition. Combining real and virtual time and place, students use it to develop a greater understanding of who they are, and how their perspectives or world views as public relations practitioners develop within three dynamic and challenging work settings. This *authentic* orientation is delivered through a *blended learning* approach, i.e. one that combines online and face-to-face delivery, and helps students to develop awareness and understanding of Public Relations (PR), and its relationship to society and ethical conduct (Cranton, 2006; Stacey & Gerbic,

(2009). Educational designer, Stephen Segrave explains the various technologies that support the e-simulation:

The Deakin LiveSim method for creating an e-simulation uses various Flash objects to assemble, house, control, and render other Flash components and media assets (such as video, audio, images), presenting them on the screen as events defined by “state” logic. “ActionScript” and XML scripting are used to enable the LiveSim architecture to present the required behaviours of objects and the simulated events over time, in a series of system “states” that respond to user interactions (S. Segrave, personal interview, 17th October 2007).

However, assessing the success of blended learning techniques like e-simulations requires careful consideration beyond the technical. In particular, paradigmatic and pedagogical orientations as well as the limitations and affordances of the ICT need factoring in; so too do the resources and input of students. Lastly, the context of e-simulation—whether it is a stand-alone activity or embedded within the unit materials—is of significance. Without a nuanced understanding of these variables, e-simulations such as PPressure Point! may succeed on a superficial level but fail to reach their potential for developing high order thinking. Before opening up these matters for discussion, the next section shows the complex discipline context in which this e-simulation is used.

WHO AM I? UNDERSTANDING PR CONTEXTS IN EDUCATION

Despite the PR profession’s codes of ethical conduct, and those of many business organisations, public relations as a function of management is primarily directed at enhancing the interests of large and powerful organisations, often to the

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