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Public relations for the next generation: Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA)'s engagement with students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance and benefits for students of an outside the classroom learning experience, attending an event presentation and workshop organized as part of a class assignment with the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA) and industry guest speakers. This study showcases MEPRA's outreach attempts to students of public relations and communications, which turned into a learning process for the students where not only was the learning outcome of the course achieved, but also the engagement with the MEPRA empowered the students. Data was obtained from an exploratory questionnaire sent to all students who attended the event. The sample included 75 surveys, of which 57 were deemed usable. The results of the survey indicate that the greatest gain for the students was related to awareness and knowledge (information and cognition) about the subject matter gained from the presentation by industry guest speakers at the event. This paper provides insights into the importance of fostering collaborations between a professional association and students of a federal government university in Dubai (United Arab Emirates). The study suggests that future activities driven by students, the professional association and faculty can contribute to developing professionalism in a growing profession in the UAE, ultimately leading to an effective learning environment. This study also emphasizes the importance of experiential learning in an environment where students come from conservative, close-knit families.

Introduction

Public relations (PR) associations, regardless of where they operate, have very similar missions, visions and values. To accomplish these, they carry out certain activities targeting different stakeholder groups, one of which is communication and public relations students. As the voice of the profession, the overall aim of such associations is to contribute to a better understanding of the public relations profession in society, making sure that the role and function of public relations is understood. Some traditional responsibilities that they are involved in are establishing ethics and standards of the profession, and providing further education to public relations professionals. Although public relations associations around the world aim to achieve similar goals, they are at different stages of their lifecycle. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), founded in 1947, is at a different lifecycle stage than are newly established regional and national associations. A long life-span may imply discussion of priority issues in public relations at an early stage and then putting these into action by launching projects to reach out to the public relations community. Furthermore, the professionalism of an association could be one of the indicators of the development of public relations within that country. Although many public relations associations are primarily targeting professionals, many also add other stakeholder groups, including

students of public relations and communication as well as university faculty, as a consequence of public relations education being developed and institutionalized.

The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) (1996) suggests that both students and their institutional environment, including faculty, student affairs staff and peers, contribute to what students gain from a learning environment. He argues that in order to further improve student learning, strategies should be adopted to enhance student personal development. Moreover, higher education institutions should create conditions that motivate and inspire students to devote time and energy to educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside the classroom. Within the classroom, environments can be intentionally designed to promote learning; for example, faculty may use effective teaching techniques and arrange classroom space to promote interaction and collaboration. On the other hand, the ACPA emphasizes that activities conducted outside the classroom can contribute to the development of cognitive and affective skills (e.g. leadership, creativity, citizenship, ethical behavior, self-understanding, teaching, mentoring) which are important to a student's post-college life. Furthermore, outside the classroom, students could be encouraged to adopt effective learning strategies such as using institutional resources like libraries, student organizations, laboratories or studios. Other strategies that can be incorporated and encouraged within the learning environment are setting study time slots, peer tutoring, participation in community governance and other educationally purposeful activities, such as education and industry partnerships. Finally, creating collaborative techniques to partner students and faculty with professional associations and practice can help students attain high levels of learning and personal development. Research shows that the impact of an institution's academic program is facilitated by what happens outside the classroom (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012; ACPA, 1996).

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the importance for students of learning outside the classroom environment. The paper explores the benefits of learning from a workshop event organized by students as part of a class assignment with the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA); and demonstrates how public relations students can be engaged with the professional association of the country so that their learning is enhanced. The best approach to achieve this is not yet known, but student/faculty/professional association partnership models have been integrated in this study and the paper discusses the event organized in collaboration with students/faculty/the public relations association (MEPRA) and its impact on their learning. This paper also looks at faculty involvement and the challenges and opportunities of this engagement. This study is particularly significant since it involves the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a new country where public relations development and education are new.

Literature Review

The context of the research

In the UAE's rapid socio-economic, educational and cultural development, public relations has played an increasingly prominent role for the UAE government to respond to the challenging demands of the country's various publics (Kirat, 2006). Furthermore, in such a rapidly developing economy, cultural customs and values may take some time to adjust to the speed of economic development (Gallant & Pounder, 2008). Emirati female students in the UAE, given a local educational perspective unlike that of many Western societies and cultures in which students are able to work while studying, are expected to study in female only campuses (Gallant and Pounder, 2008) and often do not have the option to work and study or intern freely due to social and cultural norms and restrictions (Pennington, 2016). Hence,

they are not exposed to the opportunity to associate with industry and industry associations such as MEPRA, which is critical for them to understand the link between education and industry. Consequently, events held at the university campus in collaboration with industry professionals and associations like MEPRA become increasingly important. For example, MEPRA Events held by Student Chapters on both the Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses of Zayed University host industry speakers, providing students the opportunity to collaborate and interact with industry. Thus, by organizing such an event, the MEPRA offers students an insight into how the industry and public relations function and also helps them to engage and learn from these industry speakers who speak at the event.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (2015) highlights the importance of real-life experience; in their report the Commission offers a consensus on the desirable characteristics required of an entry-level practitioner in terms of personal traits, interpersonal skills and knowledge. Further, industry leaders emphasize that 'real world' experience is necessary, while educators add that this kind of experience has also become an integral part of current undergraduate programs. The Commission also emphasizes the importance of global issues in public relations, suggesting a curriculum development with an emphasis on global competence (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). In an earlier landmark report (1999), the Commission made recommendations pertaining to modes of delivery. The report places emphasis on experiential learning, supervised work experience and service learning in addition to traditional ways of teaching in the classroom. The Commission's 2006 report continued support for experiential learning both academic and professionally, mentioning the need for internship, practicum or work experience in the field of study.

Public relations/communications students can gain real-world experience in several ways. One method is by responsibility being placed solely on the shoulders of the students: they can engage in real-world experience through their own initiative by being proactive and attending seminars/workshops, or volunteering, interning and working. Alternatively, students can gain experience through a mentor; this mentoring process could be eased with the help of educators or professionals that the student may know. Besides this, there could be institutional units of the schools/colleges of public relations and communication. For example, an in-house agency within the undergraduate program could be established to provide students with real-life experience. Other methods could include guest speakers being invited from the professional world to classrooms; university conferences offer another way to provide real-life experience; and study abroad programs, field trips, and internships can also enhance learning. In this paper, we are suggesting that considering the missions of both educators and professional organizations that provide a real-life experience to students through well-planned collaborations can be an easy and fast way to enhancing practical learning. Little has been researched in the Gulf context on the impact of any of these methods/activities on public relations education and on the student's associated learning process.

One of the more popular public relations professional organizations that has implemented such collaboration contributing to the learning process of the students is the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Their student chapter, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), is very active, serving its members locally through different campus activities and helping students prepare for their future in the industry. Their activities include a regular publication, case study competitions, student scholarships, regional and national conventions and student mentoring. After graduation, students are also invited to become associate members of the PRSA (Wilcox & Cameron, 2012).

As indicated earlier, the UAE is a unique case in the development of public relations for several reasons. Due to the country's rapid socio-economic, educational and cultural changes, government ministries and

administrative departments have had to set up public relations departments to respond to the challenging demands of their various publics. Public relations emerged with the federation of the seven Emirates in 1971, changing from a profession that did not exist at all to having professional associations, international public relations firms, establishing PR programs, and offering majors in departments and colleges of communication in universities. With two-thirds of the UAE's population being expatriate, representing over 160 nationalities, and with thousands of foreign companies, it is essential to develop efficient relationships between various bodies and organizations in the country (Kirat, 2006).

The Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA), founded in 2001 and headquartered in Dubai, UAE is the region's leading body for public relations and communication professionals and students. It is a non-profit organization aiming to encourage networks, and enhance knowledge and professional skills for its members and university students in the region through different activities and channels. MEPRA's student chapter, which is represented on its website, is

committed to supporting students across the region who are specializing in a communication-related subject and wish to join the profession. (MEPRA, n.d.)

To achieve this aim, MEPRA is currently collaborating with students and faculty at Zayed University, although such cooperation is likely to expand in the future to include other UAE universities.

Zayed University was founded in 1998 and the Public Relations program began in the early 2000's as a female only program. In 2012, the University's Abu Dhabi campus initiated their first Student Chapter soft launch, followed by the soft launch of the Dubai campus MEPRA student chapter in Spring 2014. Since then, both campuses have hosted regular but varying types of activities under MEPRA's student chapter umbrella.

This paper particularly discusses the benefits of one MEPRA event organized by the Dubai Student Chapter in Fall Semester 2014 – in relation to the students' learning experience. The paper's main focus is to explore how the involvement of public relations associations and industry professionals with students at the university contributes to encouraging student learning. It evaluates how well it works and how it might be improved, in the context of university and faculty efforts to increase industry (professional association) and educator/student engagement.

The Arab Human Development Report (United Nations, 2003) indicates that the most important challenge in education is maintaining quality, and that of the many ways of conveying information to the students, lectures are the dominant method, assuming that the students' task is to memorize the content. The course and student-chapter embedded activity that is outlined and evaluated in this paper is a different mode of delivery in which learning does not happen solely on a lecture basis.

Experiential learning

Treating knowledge as theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learned is one characteristic of didactic education and this method assumes a separation between knowing and doing. However, theories of *situated cognition* (Brown et al., 1989) consider the activity through which knowledge is developed to be inseparable from learning and cognition. This leads to an educational approach known as *experiential learning*:

a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. (Association for Experiential Education, cited in Northern Illinois University (n.d.))

Walter and Marks (1981, p. 1) state that experiential learning is a “sequence of events with one or more identified learning objectives, requiring active involvement by participants”. Experiential learning refers to any learning that supports students in applying their knowledge and conceptual understanding to real-life situations and in which the instructor facilitates the learning process (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010).

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory is based on the work of early learning theorists. He defines experiential learning as a process and knowledge created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge is the result of two ways of grasping and two ways of transforming experience. His theory has four elements: 1) concrete experience, 2) reflective observation, 3) abstract conceptualization and 4) active experimentation. This continuum is presented as a cycle, but the steps can be in any order. Kolb outlines six characteristics of experiential learning:

1. Learning is a process as opposed to outcomes.
2. Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience.
3. Learning entails the resolution of conflicts between opposite ways and requires reflections on disagreements and differences.
4. Learning is a holistic process and is adaptive.
5. Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge via transformation of experience.

(Clark, n.d.)

The literature strongly suggests that concrete experience is the basis for observations and reflection, and are critical components of experiential learning that contribute to students’ learning and growth (Glazier, Bolick and Stutts, 2017). Education as defined by Dewey (1938) is a

reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. (p. 45)

Thus, learning through experience or experiential learning is emphasized by Kolb (1984) as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of the experience”, suggesting that an educative experience leads to both growth and continuity of the learner (cf. Dewey, 1938).

There are many practices of experiential learning theory in education. These include field courses, study abroad, and mentor-based internships. Other examples of well-established experiential learning practices are cooperative education, internships and service learning. For example, Davenport University, USA (n.d.) carries out experiential learning projects in many of its programs. Rather than relying on standard lecturing and testing alone, they design projects in such a way that the skills learned in the classroom are carried outside as well. The community also benefits in this approach because students can be used as a resource for them. Their course-embedded projects involve field trips, community/business/industry experts, job shadowing, externships, research and consulting projects for business and industry, and attending community events and speeches. They also carry out academic serving projects that are usually associated with serving the community, through working with non-profit organizations. Study abroad programs are also offered so that the students prepare for global competency. The university also offers internships, practicums, and clinical experiences which are more of a traditional nature. These modes are especially common in the fields of health, technology, and business.

Such approaches also help content learning. Wagner and Buzza (2013) experimented with a new approach, with the aim of improving the critical thinking skills of undergraduate students in a course on

consumer behavior. They offered the students the option to select either a traditional form of classroom learning style (control group) or participate in a marketing incubator program (experimental group). The marketing incubator gave students the opportunity to interact with a 'real world' company, thus experiencing the marketing function and interacting with industry professionals. The results confirmed that those who participated in the incubator program scored somewhat better than the control group.

Experiential learning in public relations

Public relations is a field of study that can gain from experiential learning practices. There are several studies in communication/public relations that investigate the use of experiential learning theory; for example, Maben and Whitson (2014) researched the impact of experiential labs – the student-run public relations agencies in public relations programs. The results were positive, showing that the student-run agencies provided valuable training for students. Such student experience showed that working within a team structure ranked the most important for the students, followed by creativity/imagination, then gaining career knowledge and finally interpersonal skills. Surveys about public relations campaign teaching methods show that the majority of courses are designed in such a way that students are divided into teams and the classes function as an agency, where the instructor of the course serves as advisor or coach (Benigni, Cheng and Cameron, 2004, p. 265) implying a pedagogical approach that emphasizes autonomy rather than a top-down approach from the lecturer (Benigni and Cameron, 1999). Further, Wilson (2012) found that fostering participatory learning in client-based projects led to an increase in the students' critical thinking and problem-solving competencies. The literature on public relations education concludes that public relations courses should include 'real-world' situations to foster learning (Benigni, Cheng, and Cameron, 2004).

Another study (Benecke and Bezuidenhout, 2011) done with accredited members of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa concluded that both providers and practitioners think that experiential learning techniques are very important for preparing the public relations students for the real work environment. Todd (2009) found that public relations practitioners prefer graduates who have real-world experience with digital technologies. The concept of experiential learning theory strengthens the connection between theory and application; as Gleason and Violette (2012, p. 280), aptly put it:

the study of Public Relations is not abstract or idealized, but rather is most effective when it takes place in the context of its real-world application. (p. 280)

Methods

The main purpose of this study is to explore and understand the benefit and impact of student learning outside the classroom environment, conceptualized by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). The learning model in this study analyzes two distinct modes of experiential learning that are related to each other: *concrete experience* (apprehension) and *abstract conceptualization* (comprehension). In addition, there are two distinct modes of transforming the experience so that learning is achieved: *reflective observation*, and *active experimentation*. The learners begin with a concrete experience, which then leads them to observe and reflect on their experience. After reflective observation, the learners bring their thoughts together to create abstract concepts to explain what occurred, which will serve as guides for future actions. With these guides in place, the learners actively test the concepts they have constructed, leading to new experiences and the renewing of the learning cycle (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002).

This study analyzed the survey responses collected from student participants, from two of the University's Colleges: College of Communication and Media Sciences (CCMS) and College of Business (COB). The study event attended by these students was the MEPRA Dubai student chapter event held on 15th December 2014. The theme of the event was "We Speak Our Mind, We Connect". The event comprised four independent morning and afternoon sessions. The morning and afternoon sessions each comprised a presentation followed by a workshop. The presenters were UAE-based industry professionals.

The morning talk focused on how digital technology has revolutionized the world of traditional marketing, covering three specific areas: how hotels have been leveraging major digital trends, how travel decisions are made from a traveler's perspective, and a framework to understand from a hotel's perspective what it needs to do to win in digital marketing. In the workshop, which required applying the theories learned in university courses to a real-life situation, students had to create a digital marketing strategy for a hotel that targeted businessmen and women.

The afternoon presentation focused on improving customer services via social media. For the workshop session, students were given real-life negative customer comments made to a company in a crisis situation through different social media communication tools. The students were asked to develop a response statement, explaining how the company should respond to the customer comments.

In order to gain an understanding of the benefits of experiential learning from an extracurricular event and the impact of the industry guest speakers, the students who attended were asked to complete a questionnaire including two open-ended questions:

- a) How do you think this workshop will help you in your studies?
- b) What have you learned or gained from the workshop?

Out of a total of 75 surveys distributed, 57 questionnaires were fully completed and deemed as usable for the analysis. Some students completed the survey on the day while others submitted them a week later through their professors.

Data analysis was performed using Ellen Taylor-Powell and Marcus Renner's (2003) interpretation of narrative data analysis in qualitative research. The first step of the analysis involved the researchers reading the responses of all the students. From this, the researchers identified a few key themes for each question (see Table 1). The second step involved organizing and grouping the data together by question to look across all answers in order to identify consistencies and differences. This was done to explore the connections and relationships between the questions (see Table 1, columns 1 and 2). Table 1 provides an example of how themes were developed. First, the two questions that were asked were typed in column 1 and in column 2 all responses were listed. Then through careful sifting of the student response data, the researchers analyzed each response and grouped similar statements together. Table 1, column 3 provides an example of how the common category/themes were established

Table 1: Organizing data (steps 2 & 3).

Question	Response	Categories/Themes
How do you think this workshop will help you in your studies?	<i>it will help in terms of knowing what to focus on in my studies</i>	Provide focus to studies
Indicate what you learned or	<i>I learned a lot of things</i>	Provide a learning experience

gained today.	<i>I gained a lot of information about digital and tourism which is my choice for studies</i>	
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The third step involved categorizing the information under each theme (see Table 2). This step is crucial in the qualitative analysis because it requires reading and re-reading the text to identify coherent categories. This can be done through assigning abbreviated codes of a few letters, words or symbols, and placing them next to the themes and other ideas found in the data, which helps to organize the data into categories (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

As the data is categorized, other themes that serve as subcategories are identified. This study identified emergent categories rather than use preset themes or categories. The following themes/categories emerged from the data:

- increased awareness (of social media’s role)
- increased knowledge (of social media and how it is applied)
- awareness of the importance of digital media in general
- awareness of the importance of the topic for institutional promotion
- awareness of their professional association, MEPRA
- support for their future career

Findings

Table 2 shows the emergent themes with corresponding example supporting statements from the student responses.

Table 2: Emerging themes/statements.

Theme	Example student statements
Awareness	<i>increase awareness of how many people access media</i> <i>The presentation showed me many facts ... of the major role of media in people’s lives</i>
Knowledge	<i>I can create project that is talking about how direct web, or Google or even youtube can affect people's decisions and their lifestyles</i> <i>It will help me in my studies by showing me how things in the media section work. How media is related to marketing ... helps to know about digital marketing ... advertising ways ... researching things ... how to differentiate between things</i> <i>Learnt about do’s and don’ts</i>

Importance of digital media	<i>Digital advertising can allow organizations to target very specific demographics as opposed to other advertising methods Digital technology has revolutionized the way to communicate and target a specific people If I want to be in the future a PR specialist, I need to be more familiar with how digital media works and how I can capture my clients</i>
Importance of the topic for institutional promotion	<i>Digital media can be used to advertise our businesses The presentation helped ... if I ever want to open a shop, hotel or have a business the best way to do is using the internet or social media.</i>
Awareness of MEPRA	<i>MEPRA is something new that I learned ... and I think this is important and I should be part of MEPRA and take the chance of doing something new I like the concept of MEPRA because it connects the people in the industry with people outside the industry</i>
Support to future career	<i>Gave me clear understanding of where I want to work This presentation helped me understand how social media is beneficial to our careers</i>

Overall, the student respondents indicated that this whole-day event was beneficial to them in three dimensions: exposure and communication through the use of technology for their future career; use of technology in customer service; and awareness of the local tourism and hospitality industry in the areas of technology, customer service, and marketing.

Discussion

This research focused on an activity that was conducted outside the classroom. According to ACPA (1996), experiences in out-of-class settings both on and off campus contribute to the learning and personal development of students. In this case, an out-of-class, on-campus activity contributed successfully to the development of the attendees' cognitive skills development. The MEPRA Dubai student chapter event, through active engagement and collaboration with industry personnel, faculty, and peers through presentations and learning tasks provided at the event, contributed to the student attendees' cognitive skills development.

Awareness, knowledge, digital media

Based on the category statements, the most frequently mentioned gain for the students from this activity related to awareness and knowledge (information and cognition) about the subject matter of the workshop. For example, students gained further knowledge of the media industry and awareness of how digital media works – as one student commented: "how digital media works and how I can capture my clients". They also learned how media can affect people's decisions and their lifestyles – as stated by one student: "I can create a project that is talking about how direct web, or Google or even YouTube can affect people's decisions and their lifestyles". The event also contributed to students' current university studies in relation to lessons in marketing, digital marketing, advertising, marketing differentiation and other topics, as mentioned by one student who learned "How media is related to marketing ... helps to know about digital marketing ... advertising ways ... researching things ... how to differentiate between

things". Another area of greater awareness was uses of digital technology, e.g. "digital media can be used to advertise our businesses".

Based on the data from these student participants, we can confidently state that the experience and knowledge shared by the industry guest speakers created a positive educative environment contributing to student growth (Dewey, 1938). This form and type of experiential learning is a process which required the student participants to make sense of and connect with present and past experiences and knowledge – a transformation, suggesting that this knowledge was something new they could carry into future contexts and experiences (Glazier et al., 2017). As Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (2001) put it,

these reflections are assimilated and distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. (p. 228)

McCarthy (2016) claims that people do better in settings that require them to generate new ideas and brainstorm; additionally, their strengths lie in situations that encourage them to be imaginative, creative, construct knowledge and creating a sense of awareness of meaning and values. Overall, the experience of this event in some way addressed the 'knowledge-practice gap' (Lamb, 2015).

Connecting with industry and industry associations and career development

In terms of skills development or adult skills for future development (ACPA, 1996), some students felt the urge to connect with the industry association (MEPRA) and industry people, as stated by one student: "I think this is important and I should be a part of MEPRA and take the chance of doing something new". Some gained a better understanding of career choices, e.g. "a future PR specialist" and benefits of social media. In fact, one of the respondents stated that attending such an event "made me feel good and happy"; for others it taught them the importance of "organization". Being part of the MEPRA event encouraged students to "be a part of MEPRA and take the chance of doing something new".

It is important to note that the students who attended this event come from a close-knit, conservative families and exposure to such an event is quite novel for them (Michael, Wien & Reisinger, 2017). The findings of our study are similar to those of Rajaratnam and Campbell (2013), which indicate that industry guest speakers were helpful as they provided insights into job careers, how to prepare for job interviews; they were also found to be 'amazing', 'very relevant', 'motivational', 'encouraging students to look beyond the textbook' and 'inspirational' (p. 721). Moreover, Riebe, Sibson, Roepen and Meakins (2013) claim that an

appropriately briefed, qualified, interesting and engaging guest speaker plays an important role in active learning by exposing students to the 'real world' of the workplace and can reinforce the significance of key employability skills for future career success. (p. 55)

Conclusion

It is also possible to look at the MEPRA event from a broader perspective. The collaboration between the University, its College of Communication and Media Sciences (CCMS) and MEPRA sets an example to the region and promotes collaboration by other universities as well. Because the PR profession, PR education and an association like MEPRA are relatively new in this region, important lessons can be gained from this collaboration. Moreover, the context and the culture where PR education is taking place and where the event is happening are different to those in other parts of the world; so this initial analysis can guide what universities and professional associations can do to foster effective mutual communication and collaboration. Public relations is a growing profession around the world, and in the

UAE little is known about the status of UAE public relations and the actual experiences of students and professionals. To contribute to developing public relations professionalism in the UAE, educators and industry leaders should cooperate strategically to create an effective learning environment.

This case is unique in several ways. Firstly, the students' engagement with a professional association under faculty guidance was integrated with the learning outcomes of the events planning course to enhance student learning. Secondly, this event was organized by students so knowledge was gained through action. This also enriched the learning environment and encouraged the students to be more engaged. Thirdly, the students who attended this activity were exposed to peers who acted as role models by preparing and conducting the whole event. Finally, the event gave exposure to all players, including industry speakers, educators, and students from different colleges or departments.

The course-embedded activity carried out with the MEPRA student chapter has helped to achieve some of the course learning outcomes. The topic was initially introduced to the students, and then the students thought about the topic and the concepts and gave their reflection on it. Then students engaged in a realistic experience with the event. That experience was discussed with the students and among students on the day of the activity, via survey and later on in class.

The career path in public relations today compared to the past requires more professional and intellectual skills. Public relations/communication education should consider these skills in order to prepare graduates so that they can adapt to the work environments in their field of study. When it comes to the field of public relations, it would not be wrong to say that nothing is local anymore in the era of connectedness and 24/7 life cycles. Therefore, we suggest that the public relations curriculum should not only reflect the current environment but also update itself with content and appropriate pedagogical approaches. Public relations education should have a good blend of theory and practice, and should not be limited to classroom environments and traditional ways of teaching.

A limitation of this study is of course the small sample size from only one university in the UAE. Future researchers can broaden the sample size and diversity. Also, a qualitative methodology was used and it would be recommended to apply mixed methods for the future. Systematic analysis of this and similar future events could help record the history of a professional association's engagement with students. Perhaps new insights can be developed out of such events and processes that could influence Western educational environments rather than ideas always being transferred from the West to other unique educational settings as is currently the case.

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