COMMISSION ON
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EDUCATION

*Fast Forward: Updates on
Public Relations Education*

SPOTLIGHT SERIES

*Public Relations Education Online:
Challenges & Opportunities*

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Abstract

A conversation on what went well and challenges to teaching public relations online

As we look toward the future of online education, PR pros say to elevate curiosity among our students for the future of our industry. Based on curricular needs and footprint limitations in scope and sequence, we also recommend adding a software learning course to equip students with competencies in learning digital tool diversity. A continued theme is that students want faculty presence, indicating a need for synchronous or live engagement as a component to online learning. This also bolsters a focus on students' digital presence, which is increasingly important within the professional practice. PR educators can use "learn, do , apply, and reflect" approach to assess the ways in which these recommendations are elevating learning, increasing curiosity, bolstering presence, and delivering a quality education that uniquely serves future students.

Online Public Relations Education: A Changing Environment

When the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) released the *Fast Forward* report in 2018, there was a clear emphasis on the need to understand, to develop standards and practices, and to equip faculty to effectively teach in the ever-increasing focus on online education (pp. 111-115). In 2018, Seaman et al. found that online enrollment had grown for the fourteenth year. Additionally, DiStaso (2019) found that fifty-three precent of public relations educators indicated they offered online PR courses. Based on the recommendations from the *Fast Forward* report, a workgroup was formed to gather original data that further explored questions of practice and pedagogy in online education. This workgroup produced an online toolkit through the CEPR website and a research article in the *Journal of Public Relations Education* from the data gathered (Kim et al., 2021). While these studies advanced our understanding of online education, education and the delivery of digital content significantly shifted during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Thus, a roundtable was convened with the members of the original workgroup and authors of the Kim et al., 2021 study and members from the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) to examine the changes and opportunities now available through online learning for public relations (PR) education.

Public Relations Online Education Roundtable Discussion
What are the perceived or actual challenges to quality online education?

Due to the pervasiveness of online education during the global pandemic, nearly all students and educators gained experience in an online educational context. This experience, however, deviated from earlier approaches to online education that focused on ensuring that programs were created and faculty were equipped with "pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), mainly related to designing and organizing for better learning experiences and creating

distinctive learning environments, with the help of digital technologies" (Rapanta et al., 2020, p. 923). While COVID-19 moved educators into remote settings, there were substantial concerns about whether faculty were genuinely ready to be effective in this learning modality (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2020). Throughout the pandemic and continuing into our current curricular planning for universities, conversations continued about what is required for quality education and whether online education can effectively deliver the same learning or outcomes online. Increasingly online educators emphasize that pedagogy built on best practices and standards for digital learning are not the same as those leveraged in an emergency remote situation like many students and educators experienced throughout COVID-19 (Hodges et al., 2020).

In light of this, the roundtable discussion emphasized that the *emergency* teaching and practices enacted in COVID-19 do not necessarily represent the higher-ed provide best practices for online learning in public relations. Benefits of so many educators and students experiencing online learning include new approaches to a variety of PR courses in a digital format, greater familiarity with learning management systems (LMS), and a more ubiquitous understanding of opportunities within online education.

There have also been challenges. Many faculty launched into remote or online learning with little to no pedagogical preparation or development. Additionally, as courses transitioned incredibly quickly to a digital setting, many of the pedagogical practices that make learning effective and the time investment required for rich learning were not available. Thus, students and educators may have encountered quality concerns and perceptions about the depth of learning that reflect emergency teaching versus online education. This is a moment for institutions, programs, and faculty to reflect on what went well and to evaluate how best

practices can be embraced for the future of a non-emergency, online public relations curriculum or course.

Throughout the pandemic, many students have emphasized that they like online education, particularly when the tools, platforms, and educational environment have been positioned for a dynamic learning experience. As we move out of a COVID-19 period, however, students seem to express that they desire *flexible* learning options with some online courses and others in a traditional format. Students express that they still value the in-person time with faculty as a core component of education but enjoy the freedom to have options to customize a schedule. This also seems to accommodate the new model of students, who often are non-residential to a campus, may be working multiple jobs, or have family dynamics that make an entirely in-person schedule prohibitive. Additionally, this approach to education seems to model the future of work, perhaps indicating what the "future of students" will be as our world adapts to the landscape created in light of Covid-19 and remote learning/work.

The roundtable explored the importance of ensuring that PR education is a microcosm similar to professional practice, mirroring expectations. In light of online education and the future of work, there are strong connections that programs and educators can embed as applied approaches to equip students to navigate their future careers. For example, the industry highly values students who ask *why*. Over the last several years, trends from online learning and future PR professionals led to a discussion of concerns around the potential that online education could lose the elevation of curiosity. This may be particularly salient in an entirely asynchronous setting if students are only playing videos (often at escalated speeds) or skipping content entirely and just checking off the course. This potential approach to online learning also impacts professional perspectives of the quality of online education.

In addition to students' engagement with asynchronous content, there is also a concern with institutional conceptualizations of the pace and need for *new* content development. For example, in some institutions, PR faculty are being asked to record videos that are used for 3-5 years instead of being more dynamic and responsive to what is happening that week or day in the industry. This could substantially impact the quality of education simply as the content is not reflective of trends and changes in the discipline. The ability to (1) find a way to leverage the best of online learning while incorporating the dynamic interaction available with live components; (2) cultivate curiosity for students with intentional digital pedagogical practices; and (3) engaging the absorption of materials (not just speed of delivery) will be necessary for programs and faculty to focus on in the next wave of online education.

What do programs and faculty need to consider to ensure quality education mirrors traditional education?

The CEPR workgroup (2020) found an emphasis on understanding the tools and technical side to education as an inherent component of online education pedagogy. Scholars continue to see the integration of technology and approaches to technology as a foundational element to whether both faculty and students can leverage an online environment to optimize learning (McCollough et al., 2021). In the context of PR education, additional collaboration and industry tools can be embedded to support PR practices, like managing a campaign or developing team cohesion on a project (Formentin & Auger, 2021). This is a powerful way to equip students with practical acumen related to business tools (such as Basecamp, for example) while developing core competencies to public relations (like campaign design).

One concern, as the breadth of tools continues to grow and the need increases for increased depth of skills, knowledge, and abilities within a PR education, is the capacity of an

educator to integrate industry tools and teach the content needed in the same curricular footprint. Ideally, students would be exposed to various tools and platforms and taught how to leverage the tools' strengths throughout their courses. Additionally, they should understand how to *learn* a new tool, as technology is constantly changing. In particular, in upper-division courses, students would be able to advance their content further if they were already adept at the tools versus needing to learn them simultaneously as advanced public relations constructs. Thus, a recommendation from the roundtable is to establish a dedicated module or a course on software learning diversity that would be placed in the early level courses (likely 100 levels) that could then be leveraged throughout the curriculum. This helps address curricular space concerns to realistically teach the students *how* to use the software well and the learning outcomes already housed in courses. In a curriculum, this may be particularly salient in the 300 and 400 level courses that often have larger projects, teamwork, and experiential learning elements to manage as well.

What are student concerns or desires in online PR education?

As the roundtable discussed student desires and concerns, three primary themes emerged: (1) a need for consistent, meaningful work between online education and traditional education; (2) a desire for faculty presence and the importance of a student's experience; and (3) the need to help students hone their virtual presence throughout an online education.

The *Fast Forward* (2018) report identified strong skepticism about the quality of online education. While more people have experienced online education, and there seems to be a greater awareness of the potential quality, there are still concerns about consistency across courses. Those who participated in the roundtable provided insight into this from student feedback and program reviews. For some students, the experience of learning during the pandemic seemed to

be that they had online courses that added substantial work, which required much more time and activities, compared to an in-person course. Additionally, some students raised concerns about the consistency of the content added to online learning that was not required of traditionally taught courses. The roundtable participants felt that it would be helpful to discuss the consistency of requirements in public relations online education, as these can vary from class to class, institution to institution, and state to state. While some states have guidelines that provide parameters for online learning to help mirror the required time investment for a course, others do not have such guidance. Additionally, state-level guidance is more general and does not provide unique insight into pedagogical activities and practices that would be particularly important to public relations education. The goal would be to have meaningful, purposeful, and intentional work housed in online courses that can "translate the current workload" from traditional courses in an equitable way online.

There is a continued strong desire for faculty presence in online education according to research by Kim & Freberg, 2018. The roundtable group saw a strong desire for interaction with faculty from students, particularly after going through COVID-19 and online learning. The roundtable emphasized a concern for lack of faculty presence within a course setting. Ideas to address this included a variety of pedagogical approaches such as including live elements in classes and the compounding perception of loss of value due to lack of engagement that students expressed compared to face-to-face courses that had interaction with faculty. This seems to be another area that models the future of work and allows public relations education to model the professional practices students will need to thrive in the industry. By focusing on ways that remote and hybrid workplaces practice presence across teams and between managers and their teams, our PR educational ecosystem can transform to facilitate both PR education competencies

and workplace preparation. To determine if this is effective for an online learning environment, PR educators can use the "learn, do, apply, reflect" approach in a meaningful way that allows us to assess learning occurring in online courses. This also may help us model more interactive elements that address students' concerns about a static or non-engaged learning environment.

Finally, in online education, the emphasis on presence is not only a topic or concern for faculty but also for students. So much of PR education includes training students on their own presence, whether in presentations, group settings, or other embodied activities. Thus, the roundtable stressed the need to help students learn about their *digital* presence (which will be part of their professional future). This could include how to do direct engagement with groups in virtual settings, how to leverage software (discussed above) for successful group projects, and what effective Zoom engagement looks like in various presentation settings. There are so many ways programs could emphasize what digital presence requires, similar to our current emphasis on in-person presence. Because of the need to help students, the roundtable recommends that all PR programs and courses consider live interaction opportunities. It can capture elements to presentation in presence differently than can be assessed in an Asynchronous option. While there are a variety of formats and approaches to online learning, even if a program is offered entirely asynchronously, it is helpful to at least ensure there is an *option* for live interaction. This allows students to leverage practicing presence perhaps through optional live faculty presentations, group meetings, or other ways that they would be able to "learn, do, apply, reflect" elements to their professional digital presence.

What are some financial or administrative considerations that seem to impact this?

Lastly, the roundtable addressed key considerations from an administrative or financial position that would need to be considered in light of the above recommendations. Increasingly,

there needs to be a recognition of the "cost" of effective online education, particularly as we consider the dynamic nature of public relations. Some of the costs, in general, should account for things like a team (maybe IT) to help with captioning and ADA accessibility of content so that faculty can focus on content production and the university supports accessibility. Additionally, PR education would benefit from an emphasis on tailored education needs. In online education, it is helpful to think through the costs of things like live engagement, updated video content, software to help produce high-quality learning experiences, partnerships with third parties, and other core needs to excellent digital learning environments. The roundtable also suggested a greater emphasis on *digital* pedagogy for future faculty. It seems that there is minimal if any, specific attention to the nuances of digital learning in faculty preparation and mentorship. PR faculty can benefit from regular and more extensive explorations of digital pedagogy. This includes not simply learning an LMS but understanding pedagogical practices, tools, and apps, the intersection with professional practices, digital communication that elevates educational learning, and the unique factors to public relations education in online education.

Conclusion: Key Recommendations and Future Areas to Explore

- **Recommendation 1:** Review all materials created during the pandemic to ensure that the course design and pedagogical approach is built on best practices versus emergency remote teaching.

- **Recommendation 2:** The future of work and the future of education seems poised to embrace a flexible modality – with digital, hybrid, and in-person opportunities. As programs consider the particular design of their curriculum, it is crucial to not only consider how to offer a variety of course modalities to future students but also how to

develop other elements required in the future of work, such as cultivating students' curiosity and capacity to explore more significant concepts.

- **Recommendation 3:** Programs need the ability and support to dynamically provide content emerging in the discipline to have a competitive education. While some content can be designed and used for several years, it is crucial that considerations for addressing new topics, the latest news, trends, tools, and issues are also incorporated into the plan for online delivery.

- **Recommendation 4:** Introducing students to digital tools and teaching them technology diversity is a continued emphasis. This is something that not only will prepare them to be able to adapt and grow in the industry but is also inherent to quality online education. It is recommended that programs establish a dedicated module (or a course) on software and tools learning diversity. This could be placed in the early level courses (likely 100 levels) and then leveraged throughout the curriculum, so later courses focus more on competencies while using the tools versus teaching the breadth of the tool itself.

- **Recommendation 5:** Students continue to express a concern that a lack of faculty presence in online courses signals a lower value for the online learner or potential belief that online education is a lesser experience. Faculty should provide live-time opportunities for engagement with online students, even if a course is asynchronous. This personalized interaction facilitates a sense of connection to the faculty and often bolsters peer-to-peer interaction.

- **Recommendation 6:** A significant element in public relations education is developing a student's presence to effectively deliver content, lead groups, and engage in interpersonal dimensions online. Online education should prepare students to develop their digital

presence by providing opportunities to learn about, practice, and reflect on digital interaction. These could include topics such as leading a Zoom presentation, nonverbal communication through technology, and other elements that hold the potential to elevate or inhibit their future success. With the world of public relations going more online, preparing our online learners to be winsome and effective communicators in the digital world requires emphasizing their presence throughout an online course.

- **Recommendation 7**: Institutions and programs should set aside dedicated funding for continuous online courses delivery, not just the initial creation. This would allow greater support throughout a course with IT and instructional design to facilitate dynamic content. Additional investment should be dedicated to professional development in digital pedagogy so faculty are equipped to be effective educators in an online environment.

- **Future Development:** To ensure equity between traditional and online courses, it would be helpful to develop a standard for public relations online that guide meaningful, purposeful, and intentional work formerly housed in online courses that can "translate the current workload" from traditional courses in an equitable way online. Some state institutions have guidelines that help with how much reading, discussion board writing, and other activities equate to a traditional course – but others do not. Additionally, as there are unique pedagogical needs in public relations, it would be helpful to have a guide to support best practices.

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