

TEACHING ETHICS IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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Abstract. Ethics is one of the domains of learning in the National Qualifications Framework of Higher Education. It is one of the main duties of universities to develop a curriculum that can produce graduates who meet this requirement. As well as other professional curriculum at the higher education level, no public relations graduates should enter the field of public relations in present-day society without a full commitment to ethical practice. The main objective of this paper is to be the pilot study to explore the teaching of ethics in the Public Relations curriculum. The documentary research method is used by studying the curriculum bulletin of five universities, which provided an undergraduate program in Public Relations such as Bachelor of Communication Arts, Bachelor of Arts, and Bachelor of Journalism. The public relations curriculum undergraduate programs in this study covered the following universities: Assumption University, Bangkok University, Chulalongkorn University, Rangsit University, and Thammasart University. The study indicates that most public relations curriculum provide ethics content in specific courses such as law and ethics for mass communication, communication ethics, or ethics. Moreover, the result shows that not only are specific courses offered, but some learning objectives and the content of the public relations courses are also placed within the context of public relations ethics.

Introduction

Ethical consideration is a very important aspect of education, especially in higher education. This is because the university is the place to prepare young people to live and work in the real world. Some would argue that ethical concerns should be developed (addressed) as a young professional (practitioners) before they enter the world of work; that is, during the period of "secondary socialization" that occurs during the college years (Clark, 1983, p. 68). Nucci and Pascarella (1987) and Pratt and McLaughlin (1989) pointed that institutions of higher education are often viewed as a major vehicle for promoting positive change in ethical standards and behavior. Moreover, MacKenzie (1949) noted that providing individuals with a basic sense of moral values is a major purpose of higher education.

More recently, in 2008, ethics was one of the five domains of learning in the National Qualifications Framework of Higher Education which was encouraged by the Ministry of Education in Thailand. The National Qualifications Framework of Higher Education aims to be the principles upon which the universities are to develop their curriculum, as well as teaching and learning processes to produce graduates who achieve the standard or learning outcomes of the program. They also expect that this framework can lead to a better response to the needs of graduate's employers and the community as well. As such, it is one of the main duties of each university to develop a curriculum that can produce graduates who meet this requirement.

As well as other professional curriculum at the higher education level, no public relations graduates should enter the field of public relations in the present day society without a full commitment to ethical practice. The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) emphasized that "As in today's practice of public relations, ethical conduct is quintessential. Modern public relations, is defined by ethical principles, and no public relations practice should exist in contemporary society without a full commitment to ethical practice." The commission also suggested that both public relations educators and professionals are recognizing the increasing important of public relations ethics in the 21st century. As a result, the curriculum for teaching public relations should develop more sophisticated ethical analysis to help guide practitioners in ethics.

The main objective of this paper is to be the pilot study to explore the teaching of ethics in the current Public Relations curriculum. To complete the objective, this paper is organized in four sections

following this introduction. In section two, the development of public relations education and curriculum will be reviewed. In section three, the ethical contents provided by the public relations curriculum will be observed. The final section presents the conclusion and recommendations that have been drawn from the study. As a result of this study, the public relations curriculum designers can see the current curriculum and also perceive needed directions to develop a new curriculum.

The Development of Public Relations Education and Curriculum

A literature review has revealed that since the first college-level course in public relations was taught by Edward L. Bernays at New York University in 1923, the public relations education program has grown rapidly (Hugh & Chen, 1996; Seitel, 2007). In 1951, 12 schools offered major programs in public relations. In 1977, 130 schools offered a major in public relations, and 162 other schools offered at least one public relations course (PR reporter cited in Hugh & Chen, 1996). Nowadays, more than 200 journalism or communication programs offer concentrated study in public relations, with nearly 300 others offering at least one course dealing with the profession (Seitel, 2007).

In Thailand, courses in public relations were firstly recommended to be offered at Thammasart University in 1953. However, the bachelor degree in public relations was begun in 1965 at Chulalongkorn University (Siriyuwasak, 1983). And there were 21 universities providing public relations curriculum in 1994. (Daradirek, 1994)

For this study, the curriculums of only five universities are the subjects for analysis. They are Assumption University (AU), Bangkok University (BU), Chulalongkorn University (CU), Rangsit University (RU) and Thammasart University (TU). The structures of their curriculum are as the following table:

Table 1 – *Public relations curriculum structure of Assumption University (AU), Bangkok University (BU), Chulalongkorn University (CU), Rangsit University (RU), and Thammasart University (TU)*

	AU	BU	CU	RU	TU	
I. General Education Courses	40	30	51	30	30	Credits
II. Professional Courses						
- Core Courses	39	36	32	36	54	Credits
- Major Required Courses	42	30	20	48	18	Credits
- Major Elective Courses or Minor Elective Courses	18	30	30	15	30	Credits
III. Free Electives	6	9	6	6	6	Credits
Total	145	135	139	135	138	Credits

There has been so much written about public relations education, this may be because the field is so new compared with other disciplines and also because of the discipline's technological and environmental changes (Fischer, 2008). The main studies that can provide fruitful suggestions to the standards of public relations education are as follows.

In 1975, the first Commission on Public Relations Education, comprised of eight educators and practitioners, was formed by the PRSA. In the same year, the Commission's 1975 report; "Design for Public Relations Educator" was released. In 1978, there was a report done by William Faith and Dennis Wilcox. In 1980, "Public Relations Professional Matrix" was done by Druck. In 1981, "the Stature and Role of Public Relations" was done by Lesly. After that, the 1975 recommendation was reviewed by the 1981 Commission on Public Relations (Dickson, 2000). Recently, one of the most comprehensive studies of public relations education, "Public Relations Education for the 21st Century: A port of Entry" was done in 1999 by the Commission on Public Relations Education. Finally, the report of the Commission on Public Relations Education 2006 called "The Professional Bond—Public Relations Education and the Practice" was conducted.

Focusing on the ethical content in public relations curriculum, the report of the Commission on Public Relations Education 2006 identified ethical issues as a component of requisite knowledge and ethical decision-making as a necessary skill in undergraduate education. The committee suggested that public relations ethics should be the framework and context for developing all learning objectives in public

relations education. Professional ethics must not only be integrated into all coursework in public relations, but must also be given priority as a distinct component of the public relations curriculum. Public relations ethics are significant and important because public relations practitioners share with other professional occupations not only the ability to help (or hurt) their clients, but also the ability to a great extent influence stakeholders and society at large.

By then, the study of codes of ethics in public relations, as well as in other professions, was considered to be essential in undergraduate education. Specific legal issues such as privacy, defamation, copyright, product liability and financial disclosure were to be covered as well as legal and regulatory compliance and credibility. The 1999 Commission report further recommended that at least one course in public relations law and ethics should be included in the curricula of public relations programs.

In addition to at least one ethics course in public relations curriculum, the report also stated that graduates of public relations programs should be “ethical leaders appreciative of cultural diversity and the global society,” further noting, “Public relations practitioners and educators should be leaders in building understanding that public relations has a fundamental responsibility to society and adds value to society.”

From the mentioned studies, the ethics courses and content provided in the current university public relations programs of Thailand are presented in the next part.

Research Methodology

To find out the ethics courses and content provided in the current public relations programs at universities in Thailand, the curriculum bulletins of five universities were used as the objectives of this qualitative content analysis. Using the characteristics of qualitative content analysis, which in most cases, uses small samples-respondents of units that are not representative of the population from which there are chosen (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Moreover, it is the intention to study with the curriculums which are in a competing situation to offer PR Programs at the undergraduate level. The non-probability sampling with purposive sampling technique is used to choose the curriculum. As such, the public relations curriculum will be gathered from both government and private universities which provide an undergraduate program in Communication Arts such as a Bachelor of Communication Arts, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Journalism, and Mass Communication. The following universities were chosen: Assumption University, Bangkok University, Chulalongkorn University, Rangsit University, and Thammasart University.

In order to estimate the inter-coder reliability, three students in the Master’s degree in communication program were selected as content judges. The three judges were asked to analyze the content of each curriculum. The curriculums were initially analyzed individually, and were then analyzed in a group with the aim of producing a common analysis of each one. This is because the reliability of a content analysis study refers to its stability, or the tendency for coders to consistently re-code the same data in the same way over a period of time; reproducibility, or the tendency for a group of coders to classify categories and membership in the same way; and accuracy, or the extent to which the classification of a text corresponds to a standard or norm statistically. On the other hand, the validity of a content analysis study refers to the correspondence of the categories to the conclusions, and the generalizability of results to a theory. (Busch, Maret, et al., 2005)

The Results

After the content analysis, the results were divided into two parts: (1) the ethical courses provided by the public relations curriculum and (2) the ethics contents covered in the public relations curriculum. The details of the results are presented below.

The Ethical Courses Provided by the Public Relations Curriculum

The results show that at least 2 courses, directly related to the ethical content, are provided by each university. The course titles include such terms as “Ethics”, “Laws”, “Law and Ethics for Mass Communication” and “Mass Media and Society”. Bangkok University provides the highest number of courses (3 courses) while Assumption University provides 16 sessions of the Business Ethics Seminar in addition to the ethically related courses.

Table 2 - *List of courses that directly relate to ethical content.*

Course Name	AU*	BU	CU	RU	TU
• Ethics	✓	✓	-	-	
• Laws	-	✓	-	-	✓
• Law for Mass Communication	-	-	-	-	✓
• Law and ethics for Mass Communication	✓	-	-	✓	-
• Mass Media and Society	-	✓	-	✓	-

* Students must participate in 16 sessions of the Business Ethics Seminar as one of the graduate requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Communication Arts in Public Relations at Assumption University.

However, no university provides a course, specifically, in public relations law and ethics. Then, the study went deeply into the course descriptions of professional courses in each public relations curriculum.

Ethics Content Covered in the Public Relations Curriculum

The results stated that most of the ethical content presented in the public relations course descriptions are “Public Relations Codes of Ethics” and “Public Relations Effect and Social responsibility”. From table 3, the description of public relations courses which are offered by Assumption University mentioned ethical content the most frequently.

Table 3 – Number of courses which contain ethical content in public relations professional required courses.

Ethics Contents	AU	BU	CU	RU	TU
• Public relations Codes of Ethics	✓	✓		✓	
• Ethics as PR evaluation			✓		
• Ethics as PR Planning			✓		
• Ethics in organizations	✓				
• PR Effect and Social responsibility	✓			✓	✓

An example of how ethical content is integrated into the course description is presented as follows “*The study of the facts and conditions relating to the public relations industry in the past and present. This course is based on analysis and discussion by providing a framework for critical decision making. Students will examine the trends, policies, principles and **ethics of the public relations profession** and will be trained to analyze problems and propose solutions to the problems.*”

Actually, there is a lot of content about ethics found in the professional elective courses of each university, which are not included in this study. This is because not all students take those elective courses.

Conclusion and Future Research

There are various reasons for teaching ethics in higher education as well as the public relations curriculum. Not only to fulfill the requirements of the academic accrediting bodies, but also to develop a shared understanding of ethical norms in their students.

The reasons come from the teacher’s personal expectation of the students. Even if we are not seeking accreditation, we teach ethics because we realize that to do something well a student must not only develop good intellectual habits, but he or she must also nurture good ethical habits as well. We can see that the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) emphasized the importance of ethical conduct in today’s practice of public relations. It also requests ethics to be a part of what public relations students learn, in addition to public relations knowledge and skills.

From the study, all universities showed concern for ethics in their public relations curriculums. However, only a few topics are mentioned in the course descriptions of the professional required courses. It

is believed that teachers may cover the contents related to public relations ethics in their courses without it being mentioned in the course descriptions.

This paper was written for presentation and discussion at the conference of the 25th Anniversary of PDK (Thailand Chapter) under the conference theme “Ethics vs. Technology in the Postmodern Era of Education” and is exploratory in nature. More significant studies are required to understand the teaching of ethics in the Public Relations Curriculum. For example, the ethical content provided in the class without being specified by the course description, the ethical teaching methods should be under the study’s consideration. The study may develop along with the issue of the effectiveness of different styles of teaching ethical public relations; the time spent teaching ethics and factors such as the size of school and type of program.

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