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Public relations education in a divided society: PR, terrorism and critical pedagogy in post-conflict Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Most students entering higher education in Northern Ireland's two universities have experienced a highly segregated educational system since they were five years old. This context creates a specific set of issues and problems for the educator who wishes to engage with student groups in a critical analysis of complex and controversial topics within the curriculum. This article presents the results of a research project which was designed to assess student (and educator) experiences of studying the issue of 'PR and terrorism' at Northern Ireland's largest university. Data was gathered from undergraduate public relations students using survey questionnaires (administered before and after the teaching and learning experience). The educators engaged in this activity also report on their own 'participant observation' experiences and reflect critically upon the role academic staff might play in developing pedagogic practices which are accepting of diversity in respect to controversial and complex curriculum topics.

1. Introduction

There is a significant and growing body of work on public relations (PR) and terrorism which is important in helping to develop a critical understanding of the role and function of PR and its relationship with politics and the media in contemporary society. A unique set of issues arise however when teaching and studying this work in a post-conflict context such as Northern Ireland where definitions of concepts such as "terrorism" are, at least partially, defined and determined by the direct personal experiences of students and teachers and are therefore perhaps understood in ways different to those who study and teach about these issues in societies which can be viewed as "normal". This article presents the results of a project which explored the process of teaching and learning about the role of public relations specifically in relation to "terrorism" in this post-conflict context. The authors would wish to stress however that while the specific teaching and learning context of this study is a divided, post-conflict society, the challenge of how to engage with topics such as public relations and terrorism may also be seen in the wider context of the developing PR curriculum in higher education.

2. Background and theory

2.1. Public relations and "terrorism"

Any discussion of terrorism, as with most controversial topics, cannot get very far without an engagement with definitional issues. Schlesinger, Murdock, and Elliot (1983) describe two of the key perspectives in debates about terrorism as

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the "official" perspective and the "alternative" perspective. The official perspective is articulated by those who speak for the "State" (e.g. government ministers, conservative politicians, top security "experts", etc.) and tends to stress terrorism's criminality and irrationality and sometimes argues that responding to the threat of terrorism may require suspending certain civil and legal rights. The alternative perspective is articulated by those who dissent from the official view of terrorism but accept that violence is not legitimate within liberal-democracies (e.g. civil libertarians, critical academics, some journalists, some politicians). An example of the "alternative" analysis is Chomsky and Herman's (1979, p. 85) argument that the terms terror and terrorism "have become semantic tools of the powerful in the Western world". They make a distinction between "wholesale terror", produced by State actors and "retail terror", produced by small groups, with State sponsored terror (including by democracies) causing the greater number of civilian casualties worldwide. Best, McLaren, and Nocella (2007, p. 6) suggest that after 9/11 terrorism has become "an increasingly ubiquitous part of everyday life, and yet the meaning of the term proves to be elusive largely because 'terrorism' is a highly loaded, complex, and malleable term whose use and meaning are influenced by emotion, political ideology, and even culture". They also note that "speakers routinely brand their adversaries as 'terrorists' in order to discredit their opponents and avoid inquiry into the conditions that motivate their actions. . . .If dissenting individuals or groups are successfully demonized as 'terrorist', they are painted as fanatics, as people not to be reasoned with.. and to whom laws and constitutional rights do not apply" (Best et al., 2007, p. 6).

As noted above there has been a recent growth in PR scholarship on the topic of PR and terrorism. This work has focused on issues such as the relationship between PR and terrorism (Richards, 2004), terrorism and the PR industry (Wright, 2002), PR teaching and 9/11 (Kovacs, 2005) and government PR in response to terrorism (Hiebert, 2003; Zhang, 2007). Much of this work, while interesting, has tended to frame the debate about terrorism within what Schlesinger et al. (1983) would term the "official" view. It also largely restricts the concept of "terrorism" to the activity that Chomsky and Herman (1979) refer to as "retail terror", that is, an activity that individuals or small groups, not State actors, engage in. To take one example, Richards (2004) explains well the functional symbiosis between terrorism and the media, noting the primarily symbolic nature of terrorism. In particular he offers a good analysis of both PR and terrorism as forms of public communication noting "for both to be possible, there has to be a public created through the mass media, and an awareness of the power of the media to influence the public" (Richards, 2004, p. 170). However, with its focus on non-state terrorism and its references to the "madness" and "psychosis" (Richards, 2004, p. 171) of terrorists his work does illustrate the tendency in PR scholarship to reproduce key elements of the "official" perspective. The views of the authors of this study are closer to that of Picard's (1989, p. 14) analysis which, while recognizing the symbolic nature of terrorism, rejects the idea of the terrorist as publicity seeking psychopaths. Picard suggested that frequently terrorists groups, such as the IRA, "plan and implement extensive publicity campaigns. . .[and]. . .use most of the techniques normally employed by public relations professionals". More recent research in this area has confirmed Picard's findings (Somerville & Purcell, 2011). Dissenting from the "official" view is, of course, not to argue that the adoption of violence is a legitimate response to political disagreement but rather to point out that an analysis of terrorism which defines it as a spectacular stunt carried out by small groups of criminals or psychotic militants ultimately lacks any real explanatory power or coherence. A large scale terrorist attack has great symbolic significance and is a key part of the terrorist's communication strategy but the public relations of terrorists groups involves more than such "propaganda of the deed" (Laqueur, 1977) activities.

2.2. Critical pedagogy and PR education

The issue of what public relations students should be taught and how they should be taught while studying for an academic degree has led to significant discussion surrounding the issue of "relevance" and the higher education curriculum. Arguably the debate surrounding relevance has led all too often to the reiteration of simplistic dichotomies; academic vs practitioner, theory vs practice, education vs training, academic research vs practitioner research, to name but a few. Concerns about "relevance" has led many PR textbooks and hence much PR teaching in higher education to approach the subject from a managerial and technocratic perspective. This approach emphasizes an instrumental view of knowledge which is focused on providing a range of models and techniques designed to equip the student with "useful" knowledge. There is clearly an important place for a vocational element in the PR curriculum but it does contain certain dangers. Focusing too narrowly on a managerialist orientation can lead to the exclusion, in any coherent sense, of consideration of the wider moral, political and social contexts of practice. A technocratic focus has also been a dominant feature of marketing education and has been criticized by theorists in that discipline for failing to meet the needs of students who work, or will work, in a "increasingly uncertain and complex world . . .a postmodern world characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, diversity, disorganization, rapid change, the erosion of traditional divisions, questioning of received truths, and the undermining of established forms expert knowledge" (Caterall, MacLaren, & Stevens, 2002, p. 186). Some public relations scholars have questioned the managerial/functionalist approach to public relations education and encouraged the adoption of what is usually referred to a "critical" approach (e.g. L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006). Critical thinking can refer to an approach rooted in the Frankfurt School's Marxist critique of late capitalism but it can also mean something akin to the Socratic dialectical process. L'Etang (2008, p. 5) notes; "Critical thinking analyzes arguments and "unpicks" concepts. It often looks at "the other side of the coin" or plays "devil's advocate" to test an argument. Sometimes it will take a minority or unpopular view, criticizing those in power or exposing unfair practice". The two approaches are not unrelated and involve challenging hegemonic ideas and received wisdom. The critical approach has been challenged to demonstrate its "cash value" to the PR industry (Toth, 2002) which leads us back to the issue of relevance. This is in many ways a legitimate demand which we would respond to