Public Relations Review xxx (2017) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

Full Length Article

Bridging the writing gap between student and professional: Analyzing writing education in public relations and journalism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 September 2015
Received in revised form
22 September 2016
Accepted 2 February 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Public relations
Writing
bridging curriculum
Journalism
Writing skills
Student
Tertiary
College
University

ABSTRACT

The public relations industry expects graduates to be proficient at writing yet industry professionals still complain public relations graduates lack basic writing skills. By contrast, journalism graduates do not seem to experience the same criticisms. Using a pedagogical framework of student attainment, this study investigates public relations and journalism writing courses across 30 university courses to identify differences between the two disciplines, and implications for public relations writing education. The findings suggest public relations writing courses should adopt a bridging curriculum to support students to develop their writing skills in limited genres using authentic assessment. Strategic considerations should be covered in more advanced courses once the basic skills of public relations writing have been mastered.

1. Introduction

More than a decade ago Hardin and Pompper (2004) expressed concerns that problems with basic writing skills meant new public relations practitioners were entering the field unable to write at an appropriate level. In response, they urged public relations educators to change their curricula to incorporate a more writing-intensive approach. More recent evidence (see, for example, Cole, Hembroff, & Corner, 2009; Pompper, 2011; and Todd, 2014) suggests Hardin and Pompper's (2004) fears were well-founded as experienced public relations professionals in the US express their dissatisfaction with public relations graduates' writing skills. A similar chorus of discontent has been heard in Canada (Berry, Cole, & Hembroff, 2011), the UK (Tench, 2001), and Australia (Lynch, 2012), suggesting university public relations graduates' poor writing abilities are an international concern. Even students themselves are reporting they believe their writing skills are inadequate to meet the demands of practice (Kuehn & Lingwall, 2015).

Graduates from journalism programs do not appear to elicit or express the same concerns. Journalism employers confirm that, as in public relations, quality writing skills are desirable in new graduates (Hirst & Treadwell, 2011; Huang et al., 2006), and training in writing is generally viewed as a foundational journalism skill (Blom & Davenport, 2012).While a number

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.02.008
0363-8111/

of authors (such as Hirst &Treadwell, 2011; Masse & Popovich, 2007) identify concerns associated with aspects of writing there is not the same generalized disquiet over journalism students' abilities to produce technically-accurate writing. Du and Thornburg (2011) note some dissatisfaction among employers with the writing skills of new journalism graduates, but they cite evidence from 1993. Pierce and Miller (2007) suggest a perceived over-emphasis on conceptual foundations such as theory, law or ethics may be an issue in journalism courses, but do not suggest this has any negative impact on journalism students' writing skills.

A key premise therefore organizing this study is to understand if the perceived differences in writing skills between journalism and public relations graduates can be linked to variations between the teaching of writing in the two disciplines. The research draws on the education literature to develop an organizing framework to analyze the pedagogical approaches to teaching writing in public relations and journalism, and considers not only what content is taught, but how it is presented to students, what they are assessed on, and how that assessment is structured. These dimensions allow a comparison between the teaching of professional writing to students in journalism and public relations. A sample of course outlines from journalism and public relations are analyzed using the framework described above. The findings from this analysis are discussed, specifically noting implications for both the theory and practice of teaching writing in public relations. Finally, building on these findings, a new bridging writing curriculum approach is proposed as a pedagogical framework for public relations writing education.

2. Teaching writing

Teaching writing has long been regarded as a mainstay of education (see, for example, Eisner, 1991; Merrill, 1918). The teaching of writing is traditionally situated within early education or early skill development (Calkins, 1986). At the other end of the educational timeline, degrees and discipline majors requiring students to demonstrate professional writing capabilities, such as public relations and journalism, have to teach their students specialist writing skills (Sheridan Burns, 2003; Zappala & Carden, 2010). The writing skills taught to university students also cover specific academic genres such as critical essays and theoretical argumentation (Swales, 2004).

Pedagogical approaches to teaching writing—including those applied to teaching university-level students in disciplines including journalism and public relations—have traditionally focused on the written end product (MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2008). This *end-product* approach requires educators to teach students how to create particular types of writing such as reports and fictional narratives. More recently however, educators have adopted a *process* approach to the pedagogy of teaching writing (Badger & White, 2000; Breeze, 2012) representing a shift in emphasis from the end product to the actual set of behaviors required to produce that product (Breeze, 2012).

One of the most widely-cited process approaches to teaching writing in higher education is offered by Lea and Street (1998) who describe the teaching of writing as a process of helping students attain three levels of achievement. The first or foundation level of study skills requires students to learn and demonstrate competency in basic, generic writing capabilities such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, and expression. These study skills provide a platform upon which students are taught discipline-specific knowledge and skills in writing appropriate to new entrants to their discipline area (academic socialization). The highest level of attainment is writing that demonstrates students' expertise in their discipline area, including their ability to use writing to problem-solve at an advanced level (academic literacies). Lea and Street's pedagogical approach to teaching writing therefore involves moving students up a pyramid of increasingly difficult skill levels, each one built on the successful attainment of the previous level.

Applying this framework to journalism and public relations means students must first attain a strong base level of skill in the technical aspects of writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation, and expression). Journalism students move on to the level of academic socialization by learning to work as junior practitioners by crafting stories in different genres. The highest level of academic literacy is demonstrated when students successfully undertake advanced journalism practices such as identifying and evaluating data sources. For public relations students, the intermediate level of academic socialization requires them to achieve an understanding of the relationship between practitioners and organizations leading to the development of content for different types of collateral. The attainment of the final level of academic literacy is demonstrated by the use of high-level practitioner skills in strategic problem-solving.

The different levels in this sequenced process can be characterized by what content is taught, how that content is taught, and how attainment of each level is assessed (Lea & Street, 2006). The differences between the three levels in the Lea and Street (1998) process approach to teaching writing in higher education provide the analytical framework to identify and analyze any such differences.

3. Research questions

The guiding research question organizing this study asks: *What differences—if any—are there between the pedagogical approaches to teaching writing in journalism and public relations courses*? What is taught—that is, what content is covered in a writing unit— is the first point of difference (Lea & Street, 1998). At the level of study skills, content includes generic techniques of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and expression. Academic socialization requires that students are taught the formats and rules of discipline-relevant genres. Courses in which students attain the level of academic literacy cover an appreciation of the sophisticated and complex forces that influence the choice of writing genre and content. The first point

Please cite this article in press as: Lane, A. B., & Johnston, K.A. Bridging the writing gap between student and professional: Analyzing writing education in public relations and journalism. *Public Relations Review* (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.02.008