

UK Progress; a constructivist approach to practice-based learning in the public relations curriculum

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Abstract

In the field of applied communication, practice-based learning has typically relied heavily on case studies and simulation. This traditional approach neglects the difficult problem of applying learning to a realistic work setting and relies on prescribed learning from established models which may not reflect the experienced reality of consultancy practice.

This case study explores learners' responses to innovation in teaching and learning at the University of Central Lancashire, where they worked for laying clients and ran a communications consultancy, UK Progress. This consultancy is operated on a commercial basis by final year undergraduates who work and learn under supervision. This offers them a practice-based work setting, an innovative mode of learning and provides a modest stream of income generation for the institution.

This approach to learning is constructivist in its outlook; prioritising group activity interaction in a real life setting and the socially-based formulation of codes and norms. The approach does not ignore canonical knowledge but encourages learners to critically reflect upon it and its utility in the light of experience. There were no lectures or seminars; students learned 'on demand' from their tutors. This radical departure from more conventional approaches, which might typically involve understanding and applying canonical ideas or approaches within a strictly ordered timetable, is re-examined in the light of the reported experiences of staff, students and clients.

The paper adopts an action learning approach to research, which integrates findings into improved learning for students and improved business practice for paying clients. It explores the lessons learned after the first full year of operation and explains some of the unexpected benefits and problems that the first year's learning revealed, some of which have required a departure from the scheme's original conceptualisation.

The first year was fully reviewed by participants and is now being adapted for the second year of operation. This paper captures that review, contrasts the experiences of this learning in the UK with

a NL experience of a parallel scheme, and takes forward ideas for the future development of this combination of learning and enterprise. Proposals for future development include a model for the introduction of constructivist-inspired learning in a communications and media context that offers opportunities for wider participation, particularly among mature students and those who have to combine study with work or other commitments.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

This paper concerns UK Progress, a communications consultancy that was formed in 2003 as a vehicle for delivering practice-based learning in an applied setting. What follows is both an account of that process and a reflection on its operation over two separate academic years, although readers should bear in mind that the second year of operation is not quite complete at the time of writing; the picture is emerging, and may yet change.

The first part of this paper briefly describes the purpose and background to the project and its development as a piece of action research aimed firmly at delivering improvements to the curriculum. In that respect it shares a heritage with many similar projects at all levels of the education system, across many countries, and in many subjects. It is beyond the scope of this paper to rehearse that large field; background research has uncovered many similarities, some differences when compared with other projects, but this article is focussed on reflective practice and is neither a *tour d'horizon* nor a detailed comparative study.

A second part of the paper rehearses the background and history of the development of public relations education, including the relative hegemony of a particular curriculum and challenges to it. Although the subject of public relations offers a unique profile, readers will almost certainly discover parallels in other subjects and curricula. The same is true of the organisational setting that is briefly analysed; while each higher education institution claims its unique characteristics, their positions are in many ways similar. The way that policy has been implemented within the sector and the growth of cross-sector quality assurance schemes such as QAA and Institutional Audit processes means that similar problems, and similar benefits, may well be experienced in other settings.

The third part of the paper offers a view of the project. It covers two phases, each a year apart, and concludes with reflections and recommendations for further development in practice and in research.

If its introduction here is short, that is because the first two parts of the paper are, in effect, its true introduction.

Whatever its other shortcomings, this paper is wilfully neglectful of one important aspect of UK Progress. The project is, in addition to a mode of learning, a business. At the same time as the learning process has been reviewed and revised, aspects of the business have undergone a similar process of reflection, over the same timescale. The focus here, however, is solely on the learning, even though the business itself is under a similar process of review and revision in order to improve it for the future. In this paper, as in the operation of the company, efforts are made to ensure that business issues only impinge when they are pertinent to learning.

1. The project: its setting, and purpose

UK Progress has its genesis in a learning and teaching research project. Early in 2003 the University of Central Lancashire (Uclan) offered a number of awards to departments in order to encourage curriculum development. The Division of Applied Communication, which delivers public relations undergraduate as well as postgraduate levels, was keen to explore ways of introducing more realistic practice to its learners; in 2001 it had revised its courses, improving the structure and strengthening the provision of underlying theory. While this had raised the academic profile of the programmes, the majority of students graduated without substantial work experience; at that time a sandwich year option was only taken up by a minority of students overall. The situation was certainly not a bad one. The programme enjoyed a strong reputation, good recruitment and firm links with industry, graduate employment was enviably high. As in many similar institutions there were fears that the rising cost of education and increased competition in the subject area could affect both recruitment and retention. So, the project was begun not from a position of desperate need, but from a position of a division that wanted to offer an improved learning experience and increase the advantages that graduates from the programme enjoyed.

In the Netherlands, Hogeschoole van Utrecht, an HE institution that roughly equates to the former polytechnic in the UK, had operated a communications consultancy (known as SCompany) for five years. The Hogeschoole and its staff were already linked to the Uclan team through an academic network of public relations educators, so some Uclan staff had already heard of the project and were keen to see whether it could be adapted for the UK setting. Their initial grant of £3,000 was used to carry out a feasibility study. Around half of the funding was used to take student representatives and a member of academic staff to Utrecht to see for themselves how it worked. The remainder went

towards a business study to research the likely take-up from clients in the region. The resulting report was favourable from several perspectives; students responded with enthusiasm for this new method of learning, the Hogeschool offered to share its knowledge and experience, speeding up the process of starting the project, and clients seemed willing to pay for the service, covering some of the additional costs of delivery. A rapid period of internal development followed, along with a good deal of organisational negotiation in order to facilitate the new delivery method. By autumn that year UK Progress had its first ten paying clients and had secured an office and equipment via an internal loan, including laptop PCs, workstations, a printer, telephones and a coffee machine. In October 2003 delivery of two modules began, using client projects as the practice.

Throughout this complex process, one thing remained clear; the purpose of the project was an educational one. Defining and refining that educational purpose took two discrete, but linked, forms. On the one hand there was the decision to adopt a constructivist approach to learning and to introduce it. This will be explored in detail in the third section of this paper. A separate strand of the project was to treat it as a piece of action research, a decision driven by several factors. All the factors were organisational to some extent, but none were explicit requirements dictated by the institution, they were more the outcome of various cultural and organisational pressures acting on the writer. Firstly, there was the acute awareness of this as a new departure that was attracting some critical attention, so the need at some level to record the journey was at one level motivated by the fear of failure and the need to provide some form of report of what went on. A further factor was the research and practice environment at the institution; the feasibility study had been funded by a small but highly motivated unit within the university, the Learning Development Unit, and the project was becoming known throughout the network of learning and teaching coordinators, researchers and practitioners. Researching its development and implementation offered a way to share the experience formally and, along the way, to develop the writer's own research in the area. Most important, there was the genuine desire to improve the student experience, and it was here that the drive to action research was firmly located.

The project, though new, was a given fact by the time the research started. UK Progress had been developed quickly during one summer and was implemented the same autumn. It was progressed by adopting practice, asking students what they thought of the idea and adding a little basic market research, but little formal educational research had taken place. The research task was to proceed from its development and introduction, try to capture the experiences that it produced, and then find a way to make sense of them and adapt the procedures for the following year's activity. So, as a research problem it was grounded in 'reflection, enquiry and action...about our own professional

practice' (Frost 2002, 25), it was cyclic in its nature, with action followed by critical reflection, followed by planning, followed by action once more (Dick 1997). It was, most of all, a process with a certain amount of complexity: the researcher carried out multiple roles (mentor, director, salesman, teacher, colleague, manager, researcher) and the process itself was intended to fulfil several needs. As Hopkins puts it:

'Action research combines a substantive act with a research procedure; it is action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform' (Hopkins 2002, 42)

Costello (2003, 42 - 55) notes that action research is often compared unfavourably with traditional research methods, and offers some examples that, he claims, counter this. This researcher was less convinced – the action research process in this case is unashamedly personal and reflective, its claims to objectivity, far less to strict empirical requirements such as reproducibility, are relatively weak. On the other hand, the research is not entirely based on the internal musings. The data comprises the writer's own reflections in diary form, the results of interviews with students and clients carried out during the UK Progress work and subsequently in informal settings, and feedback from the university's own Module Evaluation Questionnaires. There are also contemporaneous records of staff meetings, client discussions, disputes, management decisions, weekly student task and social reports, individual reflective learning logs, e-mails, text messages, phone calls. In all the analysis takes into account in excess of 1100 pieces of data, although in contrast to a more empirical method, not all data is equally weighted – a casual remark can, in some circumstances, reveal more about the process than a whole sheaf of official paperwork. The reflection is carried out in relation to prior research that contains both qualitative and quantitative elements, and the results of which have been tested many times, in many different social settings. So, while the researcher bias may well be a strong factor here, there is a certain amount of triangulation, a prolonged investment of time in the research, a certain amount of contradictory evidence or 'negative case analysis' (Robson 2002, 73) and even an audit trail, all of which may help to counter criticism to some extent.

2. The hegemony of the curriculum, the challenge of the skills market

Public relations has developed both relatively quickly and relatively recently as an academic discipline in the UK. Its development owes something to its links with practice in the UK and internationally, since it was a trade body, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), which firmly established a model for public relations education in its Gold Paper No 4. That paper stated that public relations should be taught at postgraduate level to mature people, and that it should

encompass both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary elements of study. It was on this basis that the UK's first postgraduate course was established at Stirling in 1988.

Throughout the subsequent development and growth of undergraduate programmes, (something that the original Gold Paper neither envisaged nor encouraged) tension between academia and practice has been a more or less constant factor, usually focussed not so much on the curriculum itself, but on the graduates it creates. The UK public relations curriculum is, broadly, developed on a model developed in the US, where public relations education boomed in the immediate post-war period. By the time the UK introduced public relations as a subject the curriculum had settled into an academic position that was heavily influenced by American functionalism. There was a strong reliance on students obtaining a certain skill set, including the ability to carry out social science research, ethical awareness, an ability to analyse and make strategic decisions, a commitment to research and continual renewing of knowledge, an emphasis on public service and social responsibility over private interests. Much of this can be traced back to sociological work on defining the characteristics of the professions, notably by Talcott Parsons (1939) whose interest was in defining a set of defining characteristics found in occupations which were to be regarded as professional..

A variety of models have been developed along similar lines for public relations practice; for the purposes of this paper they are treated very briefly and chronologically: Broom and Smith (1979) introduced the concept of four dominant roles; expert prescriber, communications facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator, and communication technician. Dozier's (1984) investigation developed this model and concluded that there were two major roles - manager and technician - and two minor ones, media relations and communications liaison.

Dozier's manager vs technician model has been tested numerous times in various countries (L Grunig et al 2001, Toth et al 1989, and Ruler 2000). The author is currently involved in an aggregation study of this work in the UK; initial results suggest a similar position to that discovered by Ruler (1996,1997) - that while some public relations practitioners may declare an engagement with two-way communication based on research and backed by evidence, the experienced reality of their work was that it was largely based on publicity and public information models.

Cutlip's elaboration of the 'technician – manager' split (Cutlip, 1994, 44) has been influential and curriculum development has, not surprisingly, tended to develop in ways that would place its graduates on the managerial side of the divide, partly in a bid to secure academic credibility for the

subject. It is only in the past 20 years or so that academics in this subject area have seriously questioned this functional approach and have drawn on, for example, Max Weber's (1947) studies of power and the formation of power elites in organisations in order to suggest that it is power, rather than the functional skill-set per se, that is a pre-requisite for exerting influence over communication, relationship management and the creation of intangible assets in organisations. (Cameron et al, 1996; Elmer, 2001).

As L'Etang (2004, 217) notes: 'It seems that the university sector itself needed to legitimise the subject of public relations as a field of vocational study. To do this it had to take an explicitly functional rather than critical view of the topic.' As a result, the public relations curriculum has developed in ways that have encouraged the recognition and reinforcement of canonical works, drawn mainly from a relatively restricted intellectual perspective – a broadly functionalist approach aimed at creating practitioners with a particular outlook, and a defined set of skills and values.

Practitioners, meanwhile, maintain an approach to education that is far more instrumental, and as a result the market for public relations graduates is influenced by the practitioner demand that the graduates can carry out technical skills to an acceptable level of competence. Practitioner interest has focussed on skills, training, performance at a technical level. That influence is exerted on academic departments in two ways, first by professional links and the educational policy requirement to secure high employability for graduates, and secondly through the Institute of Public Relations, (IPR) an institution that recognises academic qualifications as a route to membership. Many practitioners would dismiss the IPR and academia as equally irrelevant to the industry (although on different grounds), while self-respecting universities would claim to develop their curricula on academic grounds, not on the whim of a trade body, so it is important not to overplay the IPR influence. The IPR is not strong enough to dictate curricula, far from it; there is some accommodation of interests, nothing more. However, it is fair to state that the development of the curriculum has been carried out with at least a nod towards securing industry recognition in the UK.

The growth of public relations as an academic discipline was accompanied by complaints from practitioners that graduates did not meet the needs of the industry. Many practitioners, L'Etang suggests, continue to value graduates of the 'university of life' (L'Etang 2004, 217) and to choose employees on the basis of 'calibre', of possessing the 'right stuff' or, even more simply, of 'common sense'. (L'Etang 2004, 73-75). Others have identified that buyers select and employ public relations

practitioners on the basis of factors such as personal judgements of personality and credibility (Keany, 1996; Elmer, 1998, 2000).

Thus a picture emerges of an academic discipline that has developed to endow its graduates with a particular knowledge and expectations, some of which are informed by theory and by research, supplemented by others that are informed by the professional bodies. This curriculum exists in tension with the practitioners and employers who define the market for graduates, and who neither recognise nor value many of the functionally-defined characteristics that the curriculum sets out to establish. (Elmer 2000). One market view of this situation may well conclude that the current state of public relations education is to equip graduates with knowledge for which the market shows little specific demand. The topic is commonly revisited by student research, which repeatedly suggests that the functional definition of 'professional' public relations hardly exists except as an influence on the curriculum (Cameron et al, 1996; Elmer, 2000; Keany 1993; Heath 1991) and practice exists along entirely different lines, much closer to Cutlip's definition of the technician role.

To some extent, this is to be expected and is a factor in many disciplines. This writer has often commented that the educational task is to produce unhappy graduate practitioners – discontent because they recognise that the industry they enter is not how they would wish it to be. The same is almost certainly true of graduates in architecture, in medicine, in education, where the occupational world is doubtless one of uneasy compromises where 'least bad' options are a daily fact of working lives. One naively optimistic interpretation of this is that, in striving to make the world as it is more like the world as they believe it could be, they will improve conditions in their chosen field.

It is certainly this gap, in the world between what educators want to teach and what employers want graduates to do, that UK Progress exists. In it, learners are introduced to critical perspectives on management, strategy and public relations, yet they are also required to fulfil client demands. We should expect learners to be made uncomfortable by this, and there is some evidence that we have not been disappointed, in this at least.

Before we examine that evidence, we need to introduce the organisational setting. Some features may well be common to what is, in effect, a highly regulated Higher Education sector. These are typified for the purposes of this analysis as a managerialist approach. This approach takes great account of outcomes and resources in a version of scientific management. The fact that a novel delivery method is being offered to learners does not, under the managerialist approach, excuse either them or their lecturers from meeting prescribed learning outcomes, and offering proof that those outcomes have

been achieved. Nor does it license the lecturers to offer more than a prescribed number of contact hours per week. In this case, the contact allowed per student is prescribed at three hours per module, per student. The workload model imposed within the institution assumes that modules will be delivered in one lecture and one seminar per week, and that each seminar will contain 20 students. Thus a lecturer offering a module to a group of 60 students (via UK Progress or indeed via any other delivery method) is given a contact period of seven hours per week (one lecturer, two seminars of 20 people each). This paper offers analysis under two quite distinctive responses to student contact within that approach, divided into Phase I (Academic Year 2003-04) and Phase II. In phase I the managerialist demands of contact time were ignored so far as possible in favour of a 'learning on demand' approach which set absolutely no limits on lecturer time or interaction with learners. In Phase II the prescribed contact regime was adhered to with far more rigour – attempts were made to restrict contact time, or opportunities for contact, to seven hours per lecturer, per module, per week.

It was possible to increase contact time because this was within the gift of the individual lecturer (although carried out at entirely his own risk). The learning outcomes remained a constant factor and subject to the usual quality assurance processes of moderation, external examination, review, audit and so on. While it is hoped that this and related research will add to the feedback that informs the development of the learning outcomes, it is also recognised that within the higher education environment any perceived risk to those learning outcomes would be regarded as a disbenefit to learners and to the institution.

It will be remembered that UK Progress was based on a Netherlands model, SCompany. In SCompany, the timetable is managed so that learners know that a particular period will contain no other modules. In the UK the same control over the timetable was not possible and learners found themselves working not full time, but part time, and managing other modules alongside their UK Progress work. In addition, most UK learners complete two modules' worth of learning in the UK Progress setting, compared to one under SCompany. This creates a demanding learning environment, but it echoes practice where many tasks need to be balanced and time management is a crucial skill.

Uclan's organisational setting may be managerialist, but it is not necessarily instructivist in its approach to learning. There was broad support for practice-based learning, for a style of guidance that was aimed at encouraging independent critical practice and, at an operational level, there was institutional support in the form of a loan for equipment, a company office, along with a certain amount of freedom to manoeuvre in uncharted waters that was granted in numerous modest but important ways.

3 The research framework and results

Appendix 1 details the framework for analysis, and reports the findings in the order of their occurrence, Phase I, then reflection, action, and Phase II. They provide a

Throughout the UK Progress project we have adopted a particular view of learning – we consciously rejected attempts to enforce passive learning and adopted a guided construction model (ENDER, 2004). The principal challenge was in moderating the complexity of that guidance; we very consciously guided learners in different ways and to different extents each year, with different results.

One difficulty here is (to adopt the positivist paradigm and the language of scientific method temporarily) that we could never distinguish accurately between dependent and independent variables in our experiment. Our experiences were different each year, but were they different because the students were different, because the tasks themselves were different, or because we had guided the learning process differently? Ultimately, in a field of endeavour where there are so many variables, perhaps the only appropriate response is to continue to practice our own guiding in a critical and reflective way and hope to build up sufficient knowledge and experience to be able to make accurate predictions – a test that any researcher would be glad to satisfy, regardless of whether they labour under the banner of scientific method.

Regarding the advisability or otherwise of introducing a constructivist approach to practice-based learning, the following observations are made:

The real life setting can act as a powerful stimulus for learners to engage with practice and to engage critically with both theory and practice. However, not all students willingly engage in independent learning. A minority appear dependent on a highly structured, managerialist approach, while others have insufficient prior learning to achieve high levels of competence in either theory or practice. Both of these aspects can be tackled by tutor action. Some students are adept ‘game players’ and are successful at meeting formal learning outcomes sufficiently well to avoid failure, regardless of delivery style.

The constructivist frame does not fit easily within a highly managed learning environment. The freedom to vary tasks, to engage students at an individual level, to lead and encourage learning and encourage its application in a social setting is easier to achieve if a high volume of contact between guide and learner is possible. It is often easier for the experienced guide to recognise learning needs

than the inexperienced learner. In a true 'practice-based' setting the manager/ mentor role would be a full time one, but in the managed setting of a university the contact hours allowed for this activity are more or less restricted, leading to a wide variation in this aspect of learning. At times during the restricted contact of Phase II it seemed that the project had become a 'discovery' model; some learners sought no intervention at all for a period of weeks on end.

Social aspects of learning are also easier to guide through increased contact time. In Phase II, while the formal contact time remained the same as in Phase I and was slightly more structured, group cohesion, co-operation action, commitment, sharing of information, teamwork, were all less pronounced within the cohort than in the highly social Phase I. Learning needs were identified less quickly, but where teams identified them independently they were able to satisfy them with far less tutor support than in Phase I. One counter-intuitive result was noted: teams and individuals with a dependent learning style actually sought tutor support less than those with an independent learning style, who were more highly skilled at identifying their learning needs and taking rapid action to address them.

When we turn to the emotional responses of the learners it was possible to identify the traits that Siefert (2004) offers; alongside a scale of dependent and independent learning styles we also observed students who appeared to be exhibiting one or another of Siefert's four emotional responses to learning; pursuit of mastery, failure avoidance, learned helplessness and passive aggression.

The learning of the best-performing teams was more independent in style, while dependent learners found themselves less able to direct their own learning, failed to request contact time, and produced a weaker performance. This was less pronounced in Phase I, when the level of support was, on reflection, so high that differences in performance were effectively taught out of existence at the team level, and not reflected strongly in the Phase I marking schema. But during Phase II differences were easier to both identify and to reward; teams that met the learning outcomes most successfully appeared not just to pursue an independent learning style but also to be motivated by a pursuit of mastery, coupled with a desire not just to avoid failure but to actively seek success above and beyond the constraints of formal assessment and learning outcomes.

Not all teams, though, reached a stage of conscious incompetence – faced with a challenging task and more than ten separate attempts to encourage self-critical behaviour, some learners at Phase II persisted in the belief that they already possessed enough knowledge to 'see them through'. When tutor intervention challenged this approach their response was one of learned helplessness – 'We've

never been taught that – we can't be expected to know it' was a typical response as was the plaintive 'Do we really have to?' and even 'Can't you do it for us?' At times, tutors found these responses bewilderingly immature. One analysis of this is that the challenge was framed in distinctly 'adult' ways, but it could not be rejected on those terms without the student exposing their own lack of knowledge or lack of willingness, which they were loathe to do, so the rejection was one which attempted to re-frame the experience into more familiar territory, with the student attempting to play the role of vulnerable 'child' in attempt to gain the emotional support of the 'adult' tutor.

In the face of intellectual and practical challenges, some individuals displayed passive aggression, avoiding participation or reducing their input, concentrating on ways to meet the learning outcomes with minimal input, rejecting client contact. For these learners the practice based setting and the constructivist approach is burdensome, although they continue to participate in a desultory fashion. They comprised fewer than 10% of the cohort in both Phase I and Phase II, based on Module Evaluation Questionnaires, Individual Reflective Learning Reports, weekly team reports and observation, but around 5 students in each cohort. In addition, Phase II saw the loss of two students who, faced with practice-based learning, decided that the activity was too demanding and transferred to modules they perceived as 'easier'.

At a more functional level, task completion does not seem to have been affected. All teams are expected to complete their tasks successfully. Indeed, the best of the teams under Phase II performed at a higher level of assessment than the best under Phase I, with less tutor contact. There is greater variation in 'quality', or the success with which students met their learning outcomes, at Phase II than at Phase I. One of the objectives of the action taken following Phase I, when academic opinion was that the performance was too even across the cohort, and the suggestion was that this was perhaps due to too great a level of tutor support in some cases.

Clients so far report a higher level of satisfaction at Phase II than at Phase I – perhaps due to greater skill in managing the consultancy process that was introduced following reflection on Phase I. At a practical level, the project seems to have increased graduate employability – although whether as a result of publicity surrounding the project or as a result of increased experience in the field it is impossible to judge at this stage. Many graduates from Phase I reported high level of interest from within public relations practice, although cynics may be partly justified in dismissing the project as an initiative that has had more impact on the reputation of the graduates than on the graduates themselves.

Tutors, meanwhile, also report a lower level of satisfaction with the Phase II regime. Despite the arduous demands of a high level of contact, the only real complaint from tutors in Phase I was that the university management scheme did not recognise it. By contrast the same tutors at Phase II, though working more closely within their designated contact regime, felt 'out of touch' with learners and their needs, less able to guide effectively because learners seemed to have entered a diminishing spiral of guidance – the more initiative they were compelled to take in order to learn, the less support they appeared to want, the less contact they were offered, the less they demanded. Viewed in isolation this may appear as a ringing endorsement of the power of constructivist learning. In a managerialist context, however, tutors were concerned that learners might, entirely independently, fail the learning outcomes and that this would be regarded institutionally as lecturer failure rather than as learner failure. This raised the question as to whether constructivism is an appropriate response to the highly –managed higher education environment. The fact that action between phase I and Phase II prioritised similarity of learning over individuality of learning, management of time over the authenticity of the experience, and instruction over support, all as a result of managerial rather than pedagogical anxieties, is one that continues to perplex.

Authenticity of experience has also been affected. During Phase I the higher level of tutor interaction allowed the learning to be managed along lines that more closely resembled a public relations consultancy. In Phase II, the students themselves took a greater part in managing their own learning experience and, not surprisingly, it was less authentic as a result, since few of them had ever worked in a commercial public relations environment. The environment they created was one that was a form of educational environment, very much like a postgraduate research room.

Ultimately, the constructivist approach has provided a valuable learner experience and a highly rewarding experience for mentors. Those who can learn independently benefit greatly – in Phase II it was interesting that the more independent learners made more requests for mentor guidance and support and, in turn, achieved the learning objectives at a higher level. Dependent learners and those with a high degree of passive aggression found the experience less rewarding. They are small in number, but they were supported more effectively in Phase I with a higher level of personal contact. One valuable experience has been that dependent learners often need a greater level of coaching in order to become more independent – this study found it was more effective to encourage their independence through support and guidance (which they are hoping for and expecting) than through a hard line approach to which they display an emotional resistance.

UK Progress provides an appropriately testing environment for learners who are preparing to leave education, perhaps for the first time. However, the tutor role remains ambiguous; providing the

optimum balance of support and challenge remains a complex problem, success in managing the social and emotional aspects of the learning experience is directly proportional to contact time, as is the ability to treat each learner as an individual. The tutor role is complex and fraught, particularly in the requirement to balance the demands of a managerialist approach to the running of a faculty with a constructivist approach to learning – it is here that the greatest tensions exist, and it falls largely on the tutor figure to resolve them.

Conclusion:

There is ample evidence of the continuing tension between the curriculum and practice, and of the gap between what credentialed providers expect of the consultancy role and what the buyers of consultancy services seem to require. That provides ample interest in an educational setting, but does suggest that questions about the nature of the market for credentialed public relations practitioners, and the power of buyers and providers, seem as urgent as ever.

While there are distinctive differences between the two modes of operation (phase I with a high level of tutor contact, phase II with a lower level) learners appear to be able to learn and to perform adequately regardless of the level of support. This may simply be regarded as a reflection of the old adage 'Public Relations expert needed – no experience required' but the level of achievement against quite demanding reflective and critical assessment criteria. Nevertheless, the quality of the learning experience was markedly different in each year. It is too early to assess how learners reacted, but the evidence at time of writing is that phase II learners were very much less content with their learning experience, despite their relatively good levels of achievement. This suggests that managing the social conditions of learning might rank alongside providing lectures, workshops and business support in this constructivist model to the best benefit of learners.

During phase II in particular the majority of learners achieve a critical and analytical understanding of theory in relation to practice. We might expect this group of high achievers to be the ones whose exit velocity from practice-based learning will allow them to achieve a key goal of the entire higher education process – graduate employment. No doubt some will, certainly graduates from the programme return very encouraging employment statistics, but things are not so simple. There is some evidence that this is the group that, armed with a critical reflection on the expectations of practice, of the powerlessness of practitioners in the face of client demands, of the disjunction between theory and practice, will reject practice altogether. By setting up a practice-based learning programme that was aimed at creating well-informed, reflective practitioners, there is some evidence that the effect of UK Progress on its most intellectually able learners is that they are educated out of

an occupation, rather than into one. That remains a conundrum that continues to highlight the problematic relationship between the curriculum and practice.

Further research is needed into the relationship between the public relations curriculum and the occupation, but it needs to be carried out with a critical, rather than a descriptive slant if we are to alter either the pedagogical or the occupational agenda, research that is linked to action, not just within the pedagogical process but within the society. This study has helped to define the problem in relation to practice-based learning, but the real question is far deeper: What is the purpose of education in this subject? Is it simply to reflect the needs and economic interests of an occupational cadre in pursuit of employability? If so, there is conflicting evidence that the current curriculum meets the case; graduates get jobs, but may not obtain a clear advantage over other disciplines – many employers in the field continue to recruit on the basis of personal characteristics and to support the apprenticeship culture (Keany, 1996, Elmer 2000). The findings here suggest that public relations education will, as L'Etang (2004, 216) suggests, continue to fight on two fronts, against both the dominance of brute practice and the hegemony of a functionally –defined curriculum. To that, this study would add a third area of conflict, against a managerial approach to learning.

Ends

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Appendix 1: results, analysis, activity

The framework adopted for this study was that of constructivism, not because the UK Progress project formally set out to achieve a radical or complete constructivist approach to learning, but because on reflection, the mode of learning looks more like constructivism than it looks like anything else. It is, as a result of the study, moving towards a more fully constructivist articulation of learning, but it may never be complete.

In establishing the framework for analysis the work of Caine and Caine (1991) was influential, initially for identifying characteristics against which the project, its aims and methods could be judged to be more or less 'constructivist' in approach, but perhaps more importantly for positing the validity and value of affective and emotional involvement in the setting, the group, and the learning process. The place of affective factors on the learning process was reinforced by a particularly timely piece of research by Siefert (2004) that elaborated on this aspect of learning at the very point that reflection on Phase I and planning for Phase II was taking place.

Caine and Caine's (1991) model of constructivist learning is summarised as a guiding framework, this was modified in 2004 by the adoption of a simpler frame offered by Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger. Although it is less comprehensive, its contention is that constructivism is guided by four principles; learners construct their own meaning; new learning builds on prior knowledge; learning is enhanced by social interaction; and learning develops through "authentic" tasks. Since four main headings act as a more manageable way to organise reflection, they are adopted as main categories for organising results, with Caine and Caine's more numerous and sophisticated propositions providing detail beneath those broad categories.

In each category, Phase I results followed by an account of the reflective and change processes, followed by initial findings at Phase II. Phase I was carried out with a cohort of 81 final year students, Phase II contained 64.

Learners construct their own meaning (Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004)

- 'The search for meaning is innate'. Effective teaching recognizes that meaning is personal and unique, and that students' understandings are based on their own unique experiences. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 81).
- Each brain is unique. Teaching must be multifaceted to allow students to express preferences. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 87)
- Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes. Students need time to process 'how' as well as 'what' they've learned. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 84)

Phase I:

The learning process was highly individualised – high levels of contact time allowed the tutor to develop a strong empathy for individuals, assess their prior knowledge and disciplinary route through the degree programme, and to contextualise their learning on an individual level. Groups routinely broke off and continued discussions with the tutor in a social context, as is common practice in a public relations consultancy environment. Some students noted with enthusiasm that they 'learned more in one evening than I did in a whole semester'. The group was encouraged to reflect on how they had learned, and on the utility of theory in the face of practice. However, some students participated less than others.

No formal contact programme was established in this phase. By the end of Phase I some students had received extraordinary levels of contact time backed by either personal or very small group guidance. Knowledge and appreciation of theory, critical reflection on both practice and theory, and types of practical ability were all quite variable, although the level of achievement was relatively consistent.

Some learners felt that there was a clique of students who monopolised tutor attention, and 15 of the cohort gave specific feedback that the module would be improved by a formal programme of workshops or lectures designed to offer all students the same learning.

The tutor was exhausted by the high level of contact and student demand for learning.

Reflection and action:

It was reflected that team performance was very even (which was perceived as an accurate assessment) but that unevenness in individual performance was not sufficiently recognised by the marking schema. The problem was traced to a marking schema that did not sufficiently reward individual over group assessment, which was changed for Phase II.

A series of workshops was introduced in order to ensure that all students had equal access to a structured framework of canonical knowledge. These were offered according to a strict pre-advertised programme, as with traditional seminars/lectures, although attendance was not compulsory but 'on demand'. The aim was to ensure that all learners had enjoyed access to the same learning support. This was a concession to managerialism, not to constructivism, since there is no reason to suppose that all learners need to learn the same things.

Lectures were re-introduced in order to introduce and encourage critical perspectives on the theory and practice of strategic management and public relations. This was also a managerial approach to the problem of encouraging critical thought.

Contact time was restricted, and the 'learning on demand' regime that had distinguished Phase I was replaced by a 'learning available by appointment' variation, with more constrained contact hours,

Phase II

The semester began with a highly structured approach to tutor contact. Workshops were advertised in advance according to a programme, and learners were invited to attend. Lectures introduced critical perspectives to theoretical positions

The tutor did not spend extensive time on the office environment and did not socialise with students to the same extent. Occasionally team meetings were held in a coffee bar, as in other modules, but the agenda was not free-ranging and learners were encouraged to maintain their focus on an agenda.

Individual contact was not encouraged, although as in traditional seminars it was possible to engage in conversations that helped students to contextualise their own learning from an individual perspective.

It was more difficult for the tutor to establish what learners had learned outside the formal review session or assessment. This was especially acute at the beginning of Phase II. As time progressed the level of individual contact and tutor knowledge increased, but the overriding impression was that, at the end of 12 weeks, the level of knowledge that the tutor had of individual needs and contexts was lower than at the three/four week period during Phase I.

Teaching and support was far less multifaceted, and far closer to a menu approach.

The strict contact regime became hard to manage, as learner needs started to emerge only relatively late in the process. Learners may have enjoyed equal access to the range of workshops, but they had not attended equally. Some of those who had been unable (despite multiple prompts) to identify learning needs early in Phase II had, by the end of the Phase, realised exactly how ill equipped they truly were to meet the learning outcomes. This resulted in a late surge for workshops which had already been offered but, in some cases, had not been delivered due to lack of take up from students, or had been delivered to small numbers only.

Tutor time became easier to manage and fell more within the established workplan.

New learning builds on prior knowledge (Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004)

- The search for meaning occurs through 'patterning'. Effective teaching connects isolated ideas and information with global concepts and themes. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 81).
- The brain processes parts and wholes simultaneously. People have difficulty learning when either parts or wholes are overlooked. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 83)

Phase I

The attempts to connect with prior knowledge were individual rather than global. The learner experience was highly subjective and variable and there was some evidence that learners had missed out on areas of learning because they had not been compelled to prove them or demonstrate them as part of their practice-based workload.

There was some evidence that students had learned in an instrumental way, in order to meet the client need and do the project well, but had not been exposed to wider critical theory, not encouraged to reflect on the wider processes of strategy development and public relations. In effect, they had learned parts, and they may well have constructed an idea of the whole, but they had not necessarily been guided to that understanding.

During Phase I the high level of staff contact led some students to develop their links with prior knowledge in a conversational way. It was possible for the tutor to balance support and challenge in a social setting, and it became common for some student have return to the same subject a few days after having raised it, but having gone away and read something in the interim.

Reflection and action

It was established that all Phase I and Phase II projects were of sufficient quality and complexity to allow the full range of knowledge to be applied to them, but that there was a combined ignorance – clients did not value or request the knowledge, and students were either ignorant of it or simply had not needed to cover it in relation to their project. It must be emphasised that this was not a threat to learning outcomes – it was simply that students learned instrumentally (ie, those conducting qualitative research would not necessarily have concerned themselves with refreshing their knowledge of quantitative methods).

It was decided to introduce a planned workshop and lecture series aimed at encouraging critical reflection (in the case of the lectures) and offer a 'toolkit' approach to analytical, planning and analytical skills via a series of workshops.

Phase II

At Phase II this aspect of the learning proceeded much more satisfactorily. Some learners decided not to engage with the lecture or workshop element. The majority, who did engage reported that not only did it help their understanding of public relations, but of other modules also. The gap in their prior learning was identified, and led to the development and introduction of a second year module aimed at equipping learners with a grounding in the philosophical, sociological and political perspectives that are commonly applied to public relations activity.

Evidence so far is that a greater proportion of learners will have had access to a wider spread of theoretical perspectives. These are assessed formally. However, the quality of conversation and discourse within teams and between teams and tutors is not as high at Phase II as it had been at Phase I. There is a feeling that students are more widely enabled in Phase II, but have fewer opportunities to exercise and hone their intellectual arguments outside the formal assessment regime – as a result there is more criticism in Phase II, but it is not necessarily better criticism, some of it is from a shallow perspective that has not been tested in argument.

There is a persistent issue that some learners in their final year, in a practice-based module, take the view that they have learned all there is to learn, that nothing new is required of them and that all that is required of them is to put their learning into practice. They are not, in truth, learners, but regard themselves as learned. In Phase I this group hardly existed – the level of contact was so high that individuals were routinely challenged to support their approach, views, and practice, although four Phase I learners reported that they had ‘learned nothing new’ from the experience. In Phase II this ‘learned’ group began as a relatively large one, but its members altered considerably in the course of the module. Some were guided to an understanding of their learning needs in the first week or two – others only come to the realisation towards the end of the process when it was clear that the level of performance required was higher than they were achieving.

When faced with the challenge of the practice a small but entertaining minority appear to reject the experience as ‘fake’ despite its obvious reality. Despite the demands of practice they make strenuous efforts to re-configure the constructivist learning into their own expectations of education as they have learned to expect it. Effectively, there are attempts to construct an understanding of the constructivist approach in accordance with the expectation that their learning will not be constructivist. This exposes the nature their prior learning, not about public relations but about what procedures to expect when one is gaining a degree. Some have made

attempts to re-frame the practice experience. Some attempt to excuse themselves from it on the grounds that 'I am a student', a category of existence which, in their view, excuses them from this mode of learning. There is also an emotional element to this behaviour which appears under that category of results.

Learning is enhanced by social interaction; (Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004)

- The brain is a parallel processor. It simultaneously processes many different types of information, including thoughts, emotions, and cultural knowledge. Effective teaching employs a variety of learning strategies (Caine and Caine, 1991, 80)
- Emotions are critical to patterning. Learning is influenced by emotions, feelings, and attitudes. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 82)
- Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception. Learning is influenced by the environment, culture, and climate. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 83)

Phase I

Phase I was unashamedly social in its nature, and as a result formal structures of learning were interspersed and thrown into relief by anecdotes, narratives, examples and stories drawn from learner experiences and from tutor experiences.

The cohort in Phase I was emotionally 'close'. Because it had worked intensively, worked in teams for long hours, was highly aware of its experimental status in the university and in the field of public relations, it was a group that regarded itself as pioneering. Its emotional drive was to avoid failure, rather than to achieve mastery, and it did this successfully.

As a group, Phase I developed its own characteristic culture – supportive, hard-working, collaborative. It was not, however, routinely reflective and the nature of its reflective and analytical practices were frequently haphazard and free-flowing in their conception and execution. It was, in fact, very much more like a vibrant public relations consultancy staffed by young people than it was like an academic environment, and the style and quality of its reflective practice was informed by that culture.

In Phase I it was also common to find learners exchanging tips about good articles and media comments about UK Progress via whiteboards in the UK Progress office.

Most learners responded to the culture and learning environment positively, although the relaxed nature of the workplace meant that imposing deadlines became a near-impossible task and the enthusiasm of the learners meant that they were reluctant to leave the office, even after the learning was officially complete. Had we not changed the combination on the door, some would have been there yet.

Reflection and action

In a bid to control and manage both the learning process and, more especially, the resources needed to deliver the learning, a more structured approach was taken. Contact time was consciously reduced (although it had been ventured at the tutor's own risk, a second year of what was termed 'over-delivery' could not be allowed to continue in the interests of organisational management).

A conscious decision was made to enforce a rigid delineation between work and learning, with little in-between activity.

Phase II

As a result of the changes to delivery the social and emotional context of the learning was altered beyond recognition. The office was staffed routinely, but the enthusiasm and spontaneity of Phase I had disappeared. Learners were far more studious, and the atmosphere was as a result less like that of a professional communications consultancy and more like that of a postgraduate research room.

Work projects completed under Phase II have, however, been far more businesslike in their execution overall and some have been achieved at a quality level that exceeds Phase I by a margin. However, with lower levels of contact discussion within the office does not extend beyond technical tasks on the one hand, and social plans for the evening on the other. Phase II graduates will have experienced a far more crisp delineation between work and social life, which is greatly to be admired, but which is less typical of many communications environments than Phase I. The office no longer has the feel of a communications consultancy in full swing.

The tutor identified this relatively early in Phase II and made efforts to begin to develop an emotional and cultural awareness of consultancy within groups that attended workshops. This was relatively successful – the workshop provided a clear focus for learning in a structured way and by sharing and reflecting with learners about the culture of consultancy work, about the challenges routinely facing practitioners in various fields of practice and in relations to management approaches, many learners did begin to develop something approaching a culture that approximated work. It was noted that in two cases this developed in response to a group crisis, followed by additional learning, and was therefore more likely among the slightly less able groups which had not managed to meet their learning needs independently or in a

planned and controlled way. The same pattern occurred in Phase I with one group, which faced a learning crisis and recovered following tutor intervention.

However, initial feedback suggests that learners regard the experience as a worthwhile and valuable one, some of the Phase II learners have already echoed the opinion that it is 'the best bit of my degree'.

Learning develops through "authentic" tasks. (Cooperstein and Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004)

- We have at least two different types of memory: a spatial memory system, and a set of systems for rote learning. Teaching that heavily emphasizes rote learning does not promote spatial, experienced learning and can inhibit understanding (Caine and Caine, 1991, 85)
- Learning engages the entire physiology. Teachers can't address just the intellect. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 80)
- We understand and remember best when facts and skills are embedded in natural, spatial memory. Experiential learning is most effective. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 86)
- Learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat. The classroom climate should be challenging but not threatening to students. (Caine and Caine, 1991, 86)

Phase I

Learning was entirely through practice, including fieldwork, and was resolutely authentic, for real clients, who paid real money, to have real problems solved. Settings included two factories a hospital, several health trusts and two legal firms. The least successful team was, coincidentally or not, the team with the least authentic task, completed for the University, not for an external client.

Learning in context has proved exciting and valuable for the majority of learners. The level of engagement with the subject during Phase I in particular was infectious, highly energetic and proved surprising, refreshing and invigorating for staff as well as for most students. Learning materials included a modest specialist library in the office, which the students were invited to manage – books were routinely ripped from the package as soon as they arrived, and passed eagerly from team to team in an informal library system. Some of these books were simply repeat copies of those already on the main library shelves, but their arrival as office tools made them seem more relevant to students.

The level of achievement was overwhelmingly of good quality. Several clients commented that not only was the quality of advice rather better than they had expected, but it was also rather better than they had received from commercial consultancy firms. In some areas, such as the NHS, the regional reputation of UK Progress began to benefit from positive word of mouth and third party networking. In summer 2004 the Institute of Public Relations recognised the project with the first ever Excellence Award for Education and Training.

There were some problems. As discussed in the previous sections, the environment for consultancy practice did not necessarily offer a good fit with the learning outcomes in the curriculum, so in Phase I care was taken to try and ensure that the projects would achieve a balance of pragmatic and academic outcomes. In the event, one project failed to delight its client because the outcome was 'too academic' while one was regarded as 'not professional', by which they meant not tactical.

The learning environment was regarded at times as a threatening one. When client reaction was aggressive (as it was to three teams) the teams felt threatened – avoidance of failure became the overriding impulse, not achieving mastery for those learners affected.

The worst effects of this threat were overcome due to the high levels of group support and morale, but it created additional work and resulted in the loss of some income.

Reflection and activity

On reflection, at Phase I we did not know enough about how teams would work, although we had successfully matched projects with learning outcomes. We refined our sales process and attempted to isolate and avoid projects where clients were either 'clutching at straws' or looking for a scapegoat in the face of an impossible situation. The three aggressive Phase I clients had all been in one or other category.

The workshop series was introduced to allow a planned approach to problem solving and analysis. This was considered a way to ensure that all students had access to the same learning, and that the quality assurance considerations of the module could be proved.

The relationship with industry had initially been ambiguous, with some consultancies fearing the loss of work to student groups. This was not borne out in practice – in fact, the experience was that UK Progress worked mainly for public sector organisations with limited resources but complex needs, on projects that clients could never have afforded at commercial rates. The market position that was emerging was of a specialist research/strategy unit that was not directly competing with the vast majority of commercial consultancy work. It was decided to continue on the same lines, leaving the door ajar to future collaboration, rather than competition, with commercial consultancies.

Phase II

Projects continue to be resolutely applied in nature. Research and analysis is carried out in a fieldwork setting; health trusts, hospitals, a unitary authority, an NGO, a charity. The learning and research is highly applied and highly varied.

Teams have enjoyed carrying out the fieldwork, the client liaison, and even the travel. The exception is one team, which contains at least one learner who is exerting passive aggressive behaviour, and as a result has declined to travel to meet its clients or to conduct research but has done the same thing by telephone.

However, the focus on workshops developed to the point where the proposed format could no longer contain the learning needs. At scheduled workshops, teams would appear with such a range of learning needs and so many points on which they needed advice or support that the format was not abandoned but extended, so that the practical learning needed could be covered. This did not happen at every workshop, but towards the end of the planned sequence when the practical application of learning, some recent, some merely recently refreshed, was causing difficulty to some learners. One conclusion is that the time allocated for contact is not sufficient to allow an adequate level of learner support, especially in learning tasks that are unique. The problems of internal communication in a city council are not the same as the problems of patient communication over three hospitals, or of devising a strategy to manage relationships between a charity and its stakeholders. Unlike a more conventional learning environment, where one assignment might be expected to provide a similar set of problems for a whole cohort of students, the bespoke nature of the problems in practice-based learning mean that bespoke situational learning is needed to support them.