

10-2017

Teaching PEACE: A Plan for Effective Crisis Communication Instruction Intended Course

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Recommended Citation

Please use the publisher's recommended citation. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17404622.2017.1372598>

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Word Count: 2,494

Teaching PEACE: A Plan for Effective Crisis Communication Instruction

Intended Course

This unit activity is intended for public relations (PR), crisis communication, or journalism courses.

Objectives of the Activity

The purpose is to equip future PR professionals with critical thinking skills and experience to manage crises. Students demonstrate mastery in two ways: first, by crafting clear crisis response messages and materials in a narrow time frame. Second, by applying a crisis communication heuristic to manage a simulated crisis event.

Theoretical Rationale

According to the Public Relations Society of America, “Public relations is a *strategic communication process* that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2014). One major dimension of strategic communication is an organization’s response to crisis. Anyone seeking a career in PR should note: “crisis management most often falls under the responsibility of an organization’s public relations practitioner” (Wigley & Zhang, 2011, p. 2). To ensure students graduating with degrees in PR are equipped to manage crises, they need to practice crisis communication in the classroom.

Students would benefit from studying past crises in a variety of organizations. Case studies allow students to learn what strategies have been successful, as well as why some organizations do not achieve renewal. For the PR practitioner, it is also important to engage in active learning (Baglione, 2006). One of the best forms of preparation for crisis management is

to experience a crisis, reflect on it, and apply learning to future crises. This is why simulations are fundamental to crisis communication education.

Students presented with opportunities for active learning, such as crisis simulations, are more able to draw connections between knowledge and real-world application (Chattaraman, Sankar, & Vallone, 2010). [There is a stark difference between reading a case study about enraged donors threatening to withdraw funding, and having to address those donors while attempting to answer difficult questions in front of a crowd.](#) Conducting simulations enables students to experience challenges they might face in a real crisis, in a context where the instructor is present as a support and guide.

Explanation of the Activity

Crises are challenging for many reasons. By definition, crises are unexpected events that overwhelm organizations (Hermann, 1963). PR professionals experiencing crises must think critically, plan, and communicate in contexts where they may not be at their emotional best. One way of assisting PR professionals is to provide them with heuristics, or sets of easily recalled questions, which they can use to make quick decisions about managing challenges. By drawing on crisis communication best practices (Covello, 2003; Heath, 2006) and training materials developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Reynolds & Seeger, 2012), I developed a quick-reference guide with the simple mnemonic “PEACE.” [The following mnemonic and reference guide has been used to teach and assess student learning concerning crisis communication. It functions as a reminder or checklist of processes crisis communicators should remember to enact:](#)

- Partner with stakeholders
- Empathize with those affected

- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Consider public outrage (see Sandman [1993])
- Equip a spokesperson

This process has been useful in a variety of classroom settings. To train on and test the guide, I have used the following scenario in my classes:

D.C. Metro Crisis

Three individuals were hospitalized due to heat exposure following a temporary shutdown of all Metro lines on Saturday. At 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, all Metro lines halted for exactly thirty minutes. Trains that were stopped on the aboveground section of the Orange Line reached temperatures exceeding 90 degrees.

Due to the heat, Howard Green, 66, Clarence Taylor, 70, and Marie Pitts, 75, experienced adverse effects. Several passengers self-evacuated to assist Green, Taylor, and Pitts.

Metro officials have identified a computer error linked with a mechanical malfunction as the cause of the shutdown. The malfunctioning components have been replaced.

Metro officials will host a press conference on Monday at 1:00 p.m. to address these matters, other line outages, and ongoing safety concerns related to heat-induced rail buckling.¹

To prepare for the scenario, students were tasked with researching previous crises on the Washington, D.C. metro line. The time devoted to this type of preparation is vital to helping students mentally prepare for the simulation and engage with the material. Students then spent approximately thirty minutes in class developing statements from Metro officials and from the Mayor's office about the crisis. Lastly, we took approximately thirty minutes to run a press conference where students acting as the mayor, an aide, a Metro official, and a Metro spokesperson offered statements about the crisis, how they were responding, and what they were doing to prevent a similar future crisis. The floor was then opened for questions. After approximately 30 minutes, I called the press conference to a close, and we debriefed the experience.

¹ This is an excerpt. Contact the author for a complete scenario with participant roles and background information, as well as other simulations.

The activity described here is a multi-stage crisis response, culminating in a crisis simulation that allows students to practice PEACE. To allow students time to engage with the material and respond, [between two and four 50-minute class sessions](#) should be set-aside for this unit. During the first part of the crisis unit, students are provided with detailed descriptions of their roles and the types of questions they might ask in those roles. Before the day of the simulation, students should read about, define, and discuss crisis communication and the PEACE mnemonic. Similar to the process Veil (2010) follows, while teaching PEACE to the students, we take time to make sense of how a crisis spokesperson can communicate effectively in a high-stress situation, such as a press conference. Students acting as key stakeholders (journalists, customers, etc.) receive instruction regarding the types of questions they might ask based on their roles, and how they would be expected to participate in an actual press conference.

The activity should happen in three parts. First, students are provided with the scenario and their roles and allowed time in or outside of class to familiarize themselves with the material. For the scenario listed above, roles include Metro officials, the D.C. mayor and mayor's staff, journalists, emergency responders, and a concerned citizens group, among others. Students are allowed to self-select groups and roles based on their experiences. Part of class time can be devoted to building rapport among group members, as well as to conducting research on student roles and response strategies.

Next, students should engage in a pre-simulation session to practice managing social media accounts, craft response messages, prepare background research, and answer phone calls from journalists and concerned stakeholders. As students engage in these processes, they utilize PEACE to direct their responses. The mnemonic functions as a checklist for effective response. For example, students can ask, "How am I partnering with stakeholders? Does the message I'm

crafting convey empathy and address the outrage of our target publics?” This session is important because it allows all students to enact important functions that any PR practitioner might have during a crisis. Although not every PR practitioner is going to be a crisis spokesperson, every PR practitioner will definitely be expected to engage in the process of managing the behind-the-scenes aspects of a crisis event. This activity prepares students moving into their first job to be a valuable behind-the-scenes asset in a crisis event.

The third part consists of a press conference or public forum where some students function in [spokesperson \(sometimes called “hot seat”\) roles](#), while others transition into simulated roles as key stakeholders. During the conference, some students may function as journalists, police, medical personnel, or members of the public. The specifics of part three are as follows:

- Students enter class prepared to enact the roles they have selected (e.g., Organizational Spokesperson, Medical Professional, Mayor, Journalist).
- [Student spokespersons](#) present a prepared statement, usually no more than 2-3 minutes. Students are reminded to use PEACE to draft up their statement and as they prepare to answer questions. They describe the crisis and what has been done to manage it. In this space they attempt to address possible questions from the public.
- After the prepared statement, the spokesperson opens the floor for journalists to ask questions. They have been preparing difficult questions by researching the crisis and gathering statements from the represented stakeholders.
- The open question and answer period [progresses organically, often lasting 20-30 minutes. When the discussion is no longer productive, or the students exhaust](#)

their questions, I transition to a group debrief. The timeframe allows enough space for spokespersons to present a case, and for the rest of the students to be recognized and heard.

- During the debriefing, I provide feedback to student spokespersons based on how they acted and reacted. Spokespersons are able to walk through the PEACE heuristic and discuss how it shaped their responses. Students in other groups, such as journalists or concerned citizens, are able to reflect on whether the spokespersons' responses were effective, how PEACE may have been helpful, and how the process could have been improved.

This activity is best situated toward the end of a semester. Students need time to have learned key PR writing skills; and while it is not necessary, it would also help for students to have read about crisis communication best practices, such as Heath (2006). [Heath's piece provides valuable insights into effective listening, partnering with key publics, and communicating with compassion in the midst of crisis.](#) This activity is flexible and could be adjusted to match the needs of various courses. Instructors can adjust the simulation to parallel current events, particular crisis types, or specific concepts within their course materials.

Debrief

It is important to allow time for students to learn their roles, interact with one another, conduct the press conference, and then have time to debrief the experience. Students from multiple undergraduate PR courses since Fall, 2012, when I first developed the mnemonic, have cited PEACE as a helpful tool for making sense of crisis communication. When I first developed this process the simulation functioned as a single-class activity. In that setting, with only one early class session devoted to reviewing and practicing PEACE in a simulation, many students at

the end of the semester were able to knowledgeably discuss PEACE and its tenets as they relate to crisis communication. After transitioning to a model where students have a full unit devoted to this exercise, students have reported much higher levels of engagement with and understanding of the material. The best feedback I have received is an email from a recent graduate:

I am doing a writing assessment for a company I am interviewing with. The scenario they gave me is a crisis that they want to see how I would resolve. I just wanted to email you to tell you I am going to be using the PEACE method you taught us in class... Who knew you actually use what you learn in school in the real world.

Appraisal of the Activity

Students engaged in simulations following instruction in the PEACE mnemonic have demonstrated critical thinking skills during crisis scenarios, rather than simply being able to regurgitate P-E-A-C-E. For example, students acting as spokespersons have engaged with the stakeholders represented in the scenario to address expressed concerns, rather than sticking to a canned statement or prepared message. Working within the context of the scenario, students have innovated methods for managing in-scenario challenges that I could not have anticipated.

There are some possibilities for variation in the activity. Drawing on Veil (2010), a useful variation to the activity is to partner with a journalism class to conduct crisis simulations. Students could work in small teams as crisis communication managers, and journalism students could conduct multiple small-scale press conferences. The journalism students could also record the simulation, which would create a useful debriefing artifact. Additionally, an option that allows all students to remain in key PR roles is to have students from other classes come in during part two to function as “key publics.”

Some limitations arose over the course of several iterations of the simulation. One early challenge with this activity was that students in some classes tended toward levity rather than engaging seriously with the crisis prompt. After transitioning to a model where a unit is devoted to the activity, this issue has not arisen. A second limitation is that success of the press conference portion of the simulation depends on how well the reporters and affected individuals adopt their roles. One technique that has been effective in managing this challenge is to have students volunteer for roles they are most interested in. [Lastly, this is only a guide for remembering important communicative processes following a crisis. This guide can only carry a person so far, and it cannot possibly account for every contingency. Crisis communicators also need to rely on training, practice, and counsel from colleagues. The chaotic nature of crises ensures that, despite great preparation, sometimes organizations and people will fail.](#)

There are similar activities that have been developed to address some content covered in this activity, such as Veil's (2010) piece ([see above](#)). However, this unit is unique in drawing multiple disparate threads together: students learn a framework for communicating effectively in a crisis; they apply this framework to messages that they draft in the pre-simulation writing period; and then they apply the framework to a simulated crisis event. This activity is recommended because it helps students think critically and carefully in crisis situations. Simulations provide opportunities for students and professionals to experience the stress of a crisis outside of the crisis event. Lastly, training students to utilize heuristics in crisis simulations can help them to act more quickly and effectively when they are faced with a real crisis.

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