Using communities of practice theory to teach Public Relations in higher education: a case study of an international undergraduate course

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1. Introduction

This paper introduces and empirically illustrates a pedagogical approach to teaching Public Relations (PR) in higher education. The approach is based on the Communities of Practice theory (Wenger, 1998). Based on this theory and for the purposes of this paper, learning is perceived as (1) a participation in a practice of (2) a social community and (3) the understanding of this practice. The pedagogical approach to teaching PR entails the facilitation of these three elements.

The pedagogical approach is illustrated through a case study. The authors conducted an international undergraduate course to teach students how to conduct a social media campaign to raise engagement for social issues. Twenty students from Netherlands and Germany enrolled.

In this paper the authors first review the current understanding of teaching and learning PR practice in higher education by describing the complex relationship between theory and practice in PR education and the importance of teaching students to work in an international working context. Then a pedagogical approach is described which is translated into a course design. This course design was implemented in the first semester of 2017/2018. In the second part of this paper, this course is evaluated as a case study and the results of this case study are discussed in the closing section of this paper.

2. Demand for practice and theory

PR higher education faces the demand to teach practice and theory. Practical elements are important in order to "prepare students for practice" (Crookes, 2016, p. 1) and to enable successful careers. This is the key focus of PR education according to a variety of studies with participants from all over the world (Toth & Aldoory, 2010), from Europe (Cotton & Tench, 2009), from Australia (Fitch, 2013), from South Africa (Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011), from Italy (Romenti, Invernizzi, & Biraghi, 2012) as well as from South Korea, United Kingdom and the United States of America (Chung & Choi, 2012). Practical elements entail technical and managerial skills. Technical skills include "word processing and typing, the ability to correspond via e-mail, understand use of the Internet, conduct research, and the ability to write news releases and newsletters" (Auger & Cho, 2016, p. 53). Managerial skills prepare students to be "responsible, professionally oriented self-managers with the confidence to adapt their knowledge to diverse and changing circumstances" (Bush, 2009, p. 28).

In addition to practical skills, there is a demand for theory to be part of PR education: "PR theory should be taught in every undergraduate program, […] the underpinning for all courses" (Chung & Choi, 2012, p. 377). The demand for theory comes from the academic foundation of PR higher education. PR theory includes a variety of theories from the academic fields of PR, journalism, communication science, media studies, psychology, microeconomics and linguistics among others depending on the disciplinary alignment of each PR course. The theoretic component provides students with an abstract understanding of different matters related to PR and an academic reasoning.

Teaching both practice and theory can be challenging. Practice is demanded by industry, whereas theory is expected by academia. Although an "educational curriculum grounded both in communication/public relations theory and practice" (Romenti et al., 2012, p. 212) is preferable, some authors see a "a fundamental discrepancy between the imperatives of academic scholarship and industry practice" (Fitch, 2013, p. 142). Academic scholarship strives ideally to improve the understanding of matters benefiting society and distancing oneself from individual interests. In contrast, industry pursues to simplify problems and focus on individual interests and economic benefits. The question is, whether academic theory is too abstract for particular practical problems and whether particular practical problems prevent general understanding. Therefore, PR education faces the challenge to integrate both practice and theory.

3. Demand for social skills in an international context

Apart from practice and theory, PR higher education ought to teach students to collaborate with team members, who are sometimes geographically dispersed. This ability is based on social skills applied to mediated interaction. PR education is demanded to teach social skills to prepare students for PR practice. There is "a need for students to learn […] intangible professional skills of teamwork" (Bush, 2009, p. 30). Social skills are central for PR practice, which is a group effort as part of a PR agency, a PR company division or a close cooperation between PR professionals and clients.

The required social skills also contain the ability to work with colleagues and clients at a long distance through mediated interaction. Due to globalisation, many organisations and clients are geographically dispersed. "Hence, it becomes imperative to […] prepare future practitioners for cross-cultural and global assignments" (Jain, 2017, p. 2). Most literature in the field of international public relations education focuses on the facilitation of intercultural skills (see for example Chung & Choi, 2012, p. 378). However, the ability to interact at a long distance using media technology is mostly neglected in the literature. A few exceptional studies point out the need to "prepare students for group work and virtual teams that they might encounter in the workplace" (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017, p. 447). Many PR professionals have to coordinate their work with far away headquarters. Other professionals serve clients at diverse locations and cannot always meet personally. In all those cases, PR professionals apply media technology to communicate, to create and to edit work. Social skills are needed to be able to use the technology, to facilitate a long-distance professional relationship and to create mutual rapport.

4. Pedagogical framework

The present paper introduces a pedagogical framework for higher education courses, which supports the teaching of PR practice and theory as well as social skills in the international context. The pedagogical framework is based on the communities of practice theory (Wenger, 1998), which provides an integrated understanding of learning and teaching. The framework has proved to be useful "to influence new thinking about the role of educational institutions and the design of learning opportunities" (Wenger, 2010, p. 186). Nonetheless, the theory has been rarely applied in the field of PR education. The theory is related to other pedagogical frameworks currently applied in the field of PR education such as David A. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning (Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011), Donald A. Schön's (1987) concept of educating the reflective practitioner (Crookes, 2016) and Greg Kearsley and Ben Shneiderman's (1998) engagement theory (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017).

4.1 Learning

Learning is defined as a development of "meaning-making […] [and] constituting an identity" (Wenger, 2010, p. 181). Meaning making is a process where learners link course content with a particular meaning. It is "a dual process of participation […] and […] reification" (Wenger, 2010, p. 180). Learners participate when they practice the course content. For example, if the course content is writing press releases, learners participate when they write actual press releases. The other part of meaning making is reification, which is theorising. During theorising, students understand the concept of the course content. In the above example, students would understand how press releases should be written. In this sense, theory does not necessarily mean academic theory, but rather a general understanding of something. Meaning making "requires both participation and reification to be in interplay […] to negotiate and renegotiate the meaning" (ibid.). This means practice and theory interact until the meaning is integrated and mutually applicable. In the above example, if learners experience their writing of a press release does not comply with the textbook definition, learners either adjust their practice of writing a press release or adjust their understanding of what press release writing is about.

Learning also contains identity constitution, which is a process where learners define their individual and communal identity with the help of course content. Identity provides norms for action beyond a particular practice and theory. For example, learners can identify as creatives while writing press releases. Identity entails individual and communal elements as it "reflects a complex relationship between the social and the personal" (Wenger, 2010, p. 182). For example, a learner may identify as a creative and as a digital native. In this example, the learner would see herself as a digital creative. Therefore, this learner would share a part of her identity with creatives and another part with digital natives. Communal identity describes shared identity features with other learners. The combination of all the identity parts forms the unique individual identity. Identity is constituted through a negotiation between individual and communal parts of the identity, "a process of realignment" (ibid., p. 181). Individual and communal parts of the identity interact untill they negotiate a mutually applicable identity. In the above example, being a creative and being a digital native can be contradictory in some situations. In this case, the learner needs to adjust being creative and / or being a digital native.

Altogether, meaning making and identity constitution interact and produce learning. Meaning-making influences identity constitution as meaning provides rules for understanding oneself and joining communities (Wenger, 2010, p. 181). Similarly, identity constitution influences meaning making as it guides community members' engagement with practice and theory (ibid., p. 182). Learning evolves through the negotiation of meaning making and identity constitution. The negotiation occurs untill meaning making and identity constitution are mutually applicable. Thus, learning is constituted through a mutual development of practice, theory, individual identity and communal identity (see figure 1). Whenever one of the four elements changes, the other three elements have to adapt. Once the adaptation process occurs, learning is taking place. The more each of the elements adapts the more learning occurs. However, if at least one of the elements changes in a way other elements cannot adapt, learning is hampered. Therefore, learning depends on the balance between too much and too little adaption required.

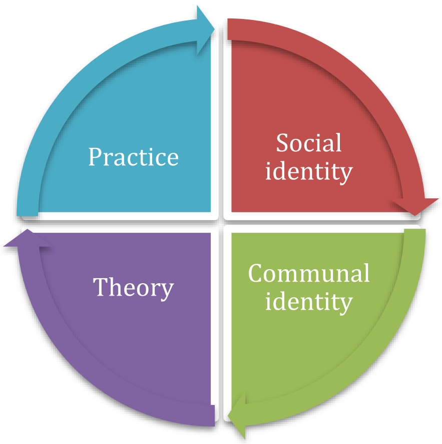

Figure 1: The four interacting elements of learning.

4.2 Teaching

Teaching can be defined as "cultivating learning capability" (Wenger, 2010, p. 194). Teaching is the facilitation of learning. According to the above conceptualisation of learning, teaching changes at least one of the four elements of learning in order for the adaption to take place. Teaching entails "decisions about what matters, about what counts as learning, about direction and priorities" (ibid.). Decisions comprise of *stewarding* and *emergent governance*:

> "Stewarding governance [...] derives from a concerted effort to move a social system in a given direction. [...] Emergent governance [...] bubbles up from a distributed system of interactions involving local decisions. [...] It is the combination of the two that can maximize the learning capability of social systems." (Wenger, 2010, p. 194)

Stewarding governance entails initial decisions by the lecturer through the course set up based on the curriculum. These decisions are directed towards the change of at least one of the four elements of learning. For example, the curriculum might entail teaching students about writing press releases, so the lecturer would set up the course in a way that students would engage in the practice of writing press releases. Emergent governance entails adjusting the initial teaching direction and facilitating mutual adaptation between all the four elements. Stewarding governance adheres more to traditional lecturing and emergent governance more to coaching. A negotiation between both types of teaching provides the best learning results.

5. Research questions

The present paper applies the above framework to a case in the field of PR higher education in order to reflect the influence of teaching on the learning of practice and theory as well as social skills in the international context. The case of a PR higher education course is introduced further bellow. The first question addresses how stewarding governance as reflected in the initial course set-up affected learning.

1. How did the initial course set-up affect student learning through the adaptation of student practice, theoretical understanding, individual identity and / or communal identity?

During the course, the lecturers adjusted the course to support the development of the four learning elements. Equally, students themselves applied strategies to help the adaption of the elements. The second question inquires about the effects of emergent governance through the lecturer and the students.

2. How did lecturer and student behaviour affect student learning through the adaptation of student practice, theoretical understanding, individual identity and / or communal identity?

6. Case study

The authors conducted an international undergraduate course to teach students how to conduct a social media campaign to raise engagement for social issues. Twenty students from Netherlands and Germany enrolled. Based on the above pedagogical concept, the strategy was to facilitate students to (1) conceptualise, implement and test own social media campaigns, (2) manage their campaigns in international virtual teams and (3) understand their actions using theory. To support this strategy the authors (a) asked students to submit deliverables, (b) organised a combination of online and offline interaction, (c) coached and gave feedback regularly, (d) provided literature, (e) asked students to reflect their experiences in different forms and (f) utilised a variety of online communication tools.

The course started with a bar camp, a day on the campus of Lingen, Germany, where the students met for the first time. On this day, the course was introduced to the students. In addition, the day was used to form student teams based on their own interests. Students could submit their own subject. There was also time for a number of lectures on e.g. the concept of 'civic cultures' and about working in virtual teams. After the bar camp, biweekly coaching moments were organized in which the various groups met online with their lecturers and discussed progress and other relevant issues. The course was concluded in Zwolle, Netherlands, with presentations that were assessed with a grade. In between those scheduled moments students had to meet regularly online to work on developing a campaign plan and on the execution of concept test. These moments had to be scheduled by the students.

7. Methods

Empirical evidence of students' learning experiences was captured through student diaries, focus groups and a survey. Evidence shows how students learned to conduct a campaign practically, participated in international virtual teams and gained understanding of their work. It also sheds light on the experiences with the tools used to support this learning. Student diaries provide empirical evidence, which are defined as first person observations of experiences that are recorded over a period of time (Krishnan & Hoon, 2002). Students were asked to voluntarily note any experiences they found relevant in connection to their course work and submit it four times over the period of the course. Sixteen out of twenty students participated and provided altogether approximately 18.000 words of text. In addition, two one hour-long focus groups at the end of the course were conducted with eighteen students to explore their learning experiences. Finally, eighteen students filled in a survey at the end of course based on Wenger, Trayner & de Laat's (2011) framework for assessing value creation in communities.

8. Results

To answer the research questions, data from the diaries, the focus groups and the survey was examined focussing on two learning objectives: (1) Students were required to apply theory to the practice of conducting a PR campaign and (2) students were required to collaborate inside international teams using online media. Concerning these two learning objectives, the paper answers the first research question, how the initial course set up affected the four learning elements mentioned above: practice, theory, individual and communal identity (figure 2). The paper then sheds light upon how the development of the four learning elements affected the learning.

Practice	**Theory**	**Individual identity**	**Communal identity**
Action / behaviour in relation to the course content.	Understanding of course content.	Personal norms.	Communal norms.

Figure 2: Definitions of the four elements of learning.

8.1 Learning objective: application of theory to practice

Students mentioned three aspects about the initial course set up, which affected their learning of how to apply theory to practice:

a) Not knowing the other students. What is the level of knowledge and expertise of the other students? What experience do they have with theory and practice?
b) Limited time for group formation, to get to know each other and to discuss which steps to take to develop a communication plan.
c) The (feeling of) forced use of theoretical concepts that have been put forward by the lecturers: Are those concepts practical?

8.1a Not knowing the other students

Most students had little or no experience with working in an international study environment. Only a few students had a bit of an international experience e.g. through an internship abroad or an exchange semester. This resulted in the situation that many students were curious about the differences between studying in the Netherlands and in Germany. Students expected differences in the way in which theory was dealt with in both countries:

> "Dutch students are more known for their practical and creative way of working. So, I am very curious how the cooperation will be. I think the Dutch students will bring up a lot of creative ideas and the German students will focus more on the theory." (S4)

After the first day students discovered that for all participants the topic of communication for social change was rather new and everybody had more or less the same theoretical starting point which was the lecture on the topic provided during the bar camp. At the start of the course, therefore, in relation to the concept of identity (individual and group), it was expected that there were some differences between the two groups. Once it became clear that the subject was new for both groups, the subject became less relevant.

8.1b Limited time for group formation

The bar camp had a full program. In retrospect, there was little time for the groups to make further arrangements. This was also mentioned in some diary entries:

> "I wish that we would have talked a little bit more about the campaign. After the first meeting I didn't have the feeling that I exactly know what I have to do next and how to start and plan the campaign". (S11)

Thus, during the first online meetings, students had to devote the necessary time to further concretizing (1) working methods and (2) the products to deliver. In this situation, it became clear more time needed to be put into the group formation process before students could get started with the project and with the processing of the theory. Forming a communal identity can thus be seen as a kind of precondition for this. Forming a group identity seems a basis that has to be present before students have the feeling they can get started.

8.1c Forced use of theoretical concepts

The course designers / lecturers have decided to use a reading on civic cultures (Dahlgren 2009) as a guideline for developing a campaign plan. Students at both universities would not usually encounter this kind of reading because of its complexity. Students were explicitly asked to read the text prior to the bar camp. According to observations, all students have done so. However, students had difficulty making this text practically applicable. This was mentioned in the panel groups:

> "The civic culture strategy I understand what it means in general, but it was hard for me to transfer it into something practical. If you could give an example how you could transfer it." (p1)

During the coaching sessions and during the final presentations, it turned out students had hardly made use of Dahlgren's civic culture framework. During the panel discussions, it also appeared many students had an ambivalent attitude towards complex theoretical readings. Some felt lecturers had to push students harder to use the reading:

> "They [the students] really need some pressure because I haven't read all the texts I have to be honest about that. […] We are all students and all youngsters. […] We need something. […] Once a week a question that we have to answer about one of the texts. That you really make sure that we really read the theory." (P1)

Others felt theories are not real or practical:

> "The theoretical explanation […] just doesn't feel real to me. I don't remember it. If we had more examples or opportunities to test things, it would feel much more real and I would be able to use it later." (P1)

It is interesting to look at, for example, the Experiential Learing Theory (ELT) of Kolb (1984). According to him, effective learning should involve going through an entire learning cycle. Some of the students prefer to start learning with concrete experiences and others with abstract conceptualization. In education, and perhaps in this course, too often a course or an assignment starts with abstract conceptualization. Lecturers might lose sight of the fact that many students prefer a different starting point:

> "Theory hampered [the learning experience]. […] Take the theory less as a leading thing in the whole campaign. You demanded from us to do a lot with the theory, while that was not what we wanted to do. We wanted to make a campaign, not a campaign plan." (p1)

Later in the project, more space was provided to deal with theory. The teachers indicated that the role of theory lay mainly in critically considering the assumptions that students had about the effectiveness of their own campaigns. This seems to have helped at least some students:

> "I did learn something from the theory and the research we did and your words. You always asked us: Why? That really made me think about what we are doing. Why are we doing it this way? I will never forget to ask myself now: Why? That really helped me and so if I now make a choice I will look at theory." (p1)

The perceived usefulness of academic theories and the transfer of this source of knowledge to practice is evident and has been the centre of debate in many publications dating back to Kant's distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, the old division between intuitive knowledge of principle and empirical knowledge. This topic will be discussed in more detail in the discussion section of this paper.

8.2 Learning objective: working in international virtual teams

The second objective required students to work in international virtual team. This objective of the course was well achieved as demonstrated in the evaluative survey at the end of the course.

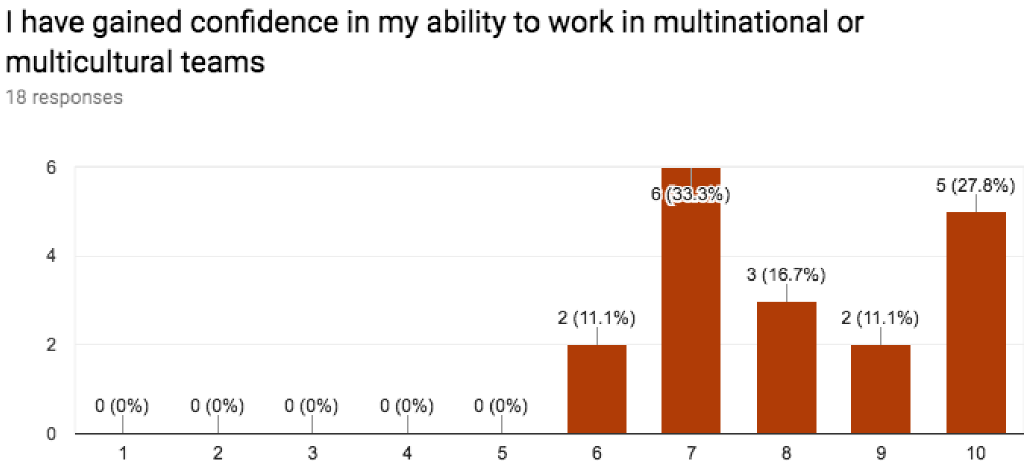

Figure 3: Student learning about working in international teams

However, students also signalled a couple of issues in relation to this topic. These issues can be summarised in the following themes:

a) Missing social cues in online conversations.
b) Scheduling meetings and work plans.
c) Tools: adding Whatsapp to the menu.

8.2a Missing social cues in online conversations

It is obvious from the results students preferred project groups which met face to face:

> "It would be a good idea to meet more often instead of just twice. [...] I would like if we met each other for one week for example and only focus on the project. Or just a few days even when we could work on it together. Then we would also see more of the cultures, of each other. You get to know each other better." (p1)

Because it was financially impossible in this project to make physical appointments apart from the first and the last meeting, students had to work together virtually. Team members working in international groups were up against stiff challenges. Students saw these challenges coming as can be seen in this quote made just after the bar camp.

> "I am still a little worried about primarily carrying out this campaign and all the other tasks through Skype or Trello (which is a tool I've never worked with before). Especially because, we're all used to conduct our team work "together together" like sitting next to each other which is easier because you're able to talk in real life and always have the possibility to ask questions or make a point." (S12)

It is clear from the answers students working in virtual teams cannot necessarily rely on traditional social cues and mechanisms, leaving them without a crucial mechanism for handling problems of team functioning. Students had to invent coordination mechanisms that can substitute to some extent for the cues that would naturally be available to members in a traditional face-to-face context.

This relates to the issue of identity construction on learning environments. The issues of trust and identity were crucial for the effective formation and functioning of virtual teams. Identity plays a critical role in communication where knowing the identity of those with whom you communicate is essential for understanding interaction. Yet, when team members are separated by spatial and temporal borders, identity is ambiguous. Many of the basic cues about personality and social roles we are accustomed to in the physical world are absent. Students felt meetings in the physical world allowed them to get to know each other far better than electronic meetings. The importance of having a good personal relationship with the other members was regarded as essential by all of the members, as this carried the community through the periods of virtual collaboration. Students did gain a greater feeling of identity and common purpose through knowing each other.

8.2b Scheduling meetings and work plans

Creating successful working groups is hard enough when students share the same campus. When team members come from different countries and are working in different locations, communication can rapidly deteriorate, misunderstanding can ensue, and cooperation can degenerate into distrust. When students on a team work in the same place, the level of social distance is usually low. Even if students have different backgrounds, students can interact formally and informally, align, and build trust. They arrive at a common understanding of what certain behaviours mean, and they feel close which fosters good teamwork. Team members, who are geographically separated, however, cannot easily connect and align, so they experience high levels of social distance and struggle to develop effective interactions.

Mitigating social distance therefore becomes the primary challenge in managing international virtual teams. The teams were aware of this and defined some solutions that are essential for successful virtual teams. Some are rather straightforward. A virtual meeting should start before the scheduled time slot:

> "I also think to check tools in advance of a meeting. Especially in online communication to check if the Wi-Fi-connection is good. Because we had technical issues so many times. Forty minutes already passed and we were still not speaking about the campaign. The microphone was off or we didn't find the button to get skype going." (p1)

It can be helpful to organise time slots beforehand:

> "To make contact with each other is ten times easier, when you have the same course at the same time. Sometimes we got stuck at one point. You realise I am free now, but the others are free in the evening. So, we can talk in two days. That is very difficult." (p1)

Students also signalled the importance of having a clear team structure with defined roles:

> "You also gave us the tip to set some roles: project manager, secretary or whatever. That was a good organisational thing, because we knew if we had a meeting together, there was somebody who was responsible for writing down everything we talked about. There was somebody, who made new folders. And there was also somebody, who was responsible for the leading, always reminding others about the deadline. That was also very good and positive." (p1)

These findings are in line with research from Coppola et al. (2004). Reinforcing predictable communication patterns are essential for the success of virtual teams. Also Rice et al. (2007) described how having formal and structured procedures and processes can increase effectiveness. Developing a team culture and common communication procedures are essential for the development of credibility and trust among team members in a virtual environment. A communal identity is built up through face-to-face communication in the physical environment and carried over into the virtual collaboration space. The design of the course seemed to enable the physical and virtual space to be successfully integrated. Students seemed to have crossed different boundaries (group, cultural national) by building trust and understanding so that the project teams were able to share and leverage practices and concepts.

8.2c Tools: adding WhatsApp to the menu

In the beginning of the course, students were advised by the lecturers to use video conferencing tools like Skype or Google Hangout, agile project management tools like Trello and collaborative text processing tools like Google Docs. In addition, students spontaneously added WhatsApp to the list of tools used for working in virtual teams. Whatsapp facilitated communication, transferring and sharing images and files in an easy way. It also seems the tool ensured students could easily keep in touch outside the planned meeting moments. These messaging tools helped to keep each other involved in the project:

> "We noticed we use WhatsApp more than some of the other groups. I think this helps us, because we stay in touch, we help each other and remind each other. It motivates us." (S4)

Text messages, however, do not replace the joint meeting moments. These moments remain important in providing structure and it is also easier to make appointments in a joint meeting. Communications via messaging services are asynchronous. It therefore seems important to have sufficient variation between synchronous and asynchronous communication moments.

> "Sometimes I have the feeling, that the hangout session is not necessary, because we could just talk about everything on WhatsApp. But that's not true. It is so much easier to talk about things instead of writing. It is much faster and everyone is part of the conversation and responding." (S11)

Asynchronous tools including messaging tools like WhatsApp have clear advantages. Team members can express their ideas completely without interruption by others and can make these contributions at a time personally convenient or available to them, thus removing competition for immediate airtime. Asynchronous communication also provides a constant opportunity to talk through problems, share perspectives, get feedback, and answer questions that arise among team members without waiting for scheduled meetings.

However, asynchronous communication has also disadvantages. Hinds and Weisband (2003) found out virtual team members tend to initially share less information than members of face-to-face teams. Also local priorities (other face-to-face courses and working groups) do interfere in setting priorities. Virtual work is seen as a less important task activity that needs to be dealt with or managed when possible and when not interfering with other regular responsibilities. This finding was also mirrored in a non-study context by Klein and Barrett (2001). In building a communal identity, virtual team leaders need to capture the attention of team members or risk that the virtual work will receive low priority because of perceived low importance, visibility, or salience and therefore be considered somewhat irrelevant in terms of priorities.

9. Discussion

The case study illustrates the importance of practice, theory, individual and communal identity for the teaching of PR higher education courses. PR educators should anticipate all the four elements during the conceptualisation of courses and integrate them into the courses in order to monitor and facilitate learning.

Course developers should anticipate students' practical abilities, theoretical knowledge, individual and communal identities. In the above case study, students were asked to relate their practice to theoretical academic understanding. One of the challenges for the students was the choice of literature, which seemed to be too difficult. Lecturers misjudged the students' academic abilities. This echoes the results of an USA case study, where students struggled with academic theory and abstract thinking (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017, p. 452). However, course evaluation revealed student identities were another major challenge. Some students did not see a sense in applying an academic understanding to PR practice and did not have the motivation to comprehend abstract academic writing. Although the lecturers pointed out the relevance of the literature and the importance of its application for the final grade, it was not sufficient to encourage students to base their practical work on academic understanding. The lecturers should have either laid more emphasis on the role of academic theory or reduced their academic expectations. This example shows all the four elements of learning are relevant for planning courses. It is not sufficient to plan how to teach theory, if the goal is to improve academic understanding. Identity-constitution has to be equally accounted for in the course conceptualisation.

The above case study provides another example for the importance of an integrated understanding of learning. Students were required to work in international teams using mediated interaction. It proved useful that lecturers supported this practice by providing students with knowledge about intercultural interaction, mediated communication and project management. Lecturers also provided short team building measures to support communal identity. This is in line with a variety of studies, which point to the need to train students to deal with virtual or mediated classrooms (Gilsen et al 2013). This example shows that planning to teach social skills goes beyond including social practices into courses. Teaching theory on collaboration and facilitating students' communal identity are equally necessary.

Besides anticipating the four learning elements during the conceptualisation of the PR education, it is equally important to integrate the four elements into courses to monitor and facilitate learning. In the above case study, the PR course entailed practical, theoretical and identity-constituting elements. This is in line with PR education studies which advise to include "process-oriented experiential learning" (Bush, 2009, p. 35), "reflective observation [and] abstract conceptualisation" (Benecke & Bezuidenhout, 2011,

p. 65) and activating course elements which encourage students “to be partners in their learning experiences” (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017, p. 444). These elements helped the lecturers in the case study to monitor students’ learning experience. The lecturers noticed early that students struggled to apply academic theory to their practice. They also realised students struggled to foster communal identities due to the long-distance interaction. In both cases, lecturers applied coaching to overcome the challenges. They showed what kind of practical elements could be related to academic theory and they advised on mediated communication practices. In addition, lecturers encouraged students to reflect on the challenges and find individual solutions.

Apart from that, it is important to discuss Wenger’s (2010) concept of learning as meaning making and identity constitution. This concept needs to be applied with some caution in formal educational settings including education in undergraduate communication studies. Wenger’s model developed from researching learning in apprenticeship contexts. The role of the instructor in these contexts – where teaching is incidental rather than deliberate – does not translate easily to that of the lecturer in a university setting, where the lecturer is held accountable for ensuring successful learning.

10. Conclusion

The pedagogical approach in the researched course offers an integrated understanding of theory and practice (see Wenger 1998, p. 48). It contrasts many current approaches in PR education, which tend to differentiate between PR theory and practice. However, according to the approach illustrated in the present paper, theory and practice are enwined and form each other’s counterparts. The pedagogical challenge is not to include practical or theoretical elements, but to adjust the already existing but sometimes implicit counterparts of either theory or practice. PR educators are encouraged to facilitate an equal negotiation between theory and practice and to enable students to match whatever is theorised with practice and whatever is practiced with theory.

In relation to the learning outcome of working in virtual teams, results show that the course succeeded in creating a sense of community within the class. However, gaps in expectations related to work regulations and decision-making were recorded as German and Dutch team members tended to flock together because of shared meaning systems. Another challenge was to adjust to virtual communication as compared to face-to-face meetings. However, students did overcome these challenges by sharing their perspectives on working in virtual educational teams.

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