

Eco-Tourism Campaigns as a Framework for Global PR Course

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ABSTRACT

As an understanding of international diversity has become more vital than ever before, PR educators are responsible for the mammoth task of imparting cultural sensitivity and equality in undergraduate classrooms. This teaching brief provides an opportunity for PR educators to help students understand cultural and structural differences among different countries. It also asks undergraduate students to think in an environmentally-friendly way in an international context. This teaching brief provides individual and group assignments to help instructors facilitate thought-provoking conversations in the classroom, and enhance student learning on international diversity issues in public relations.

Keywords: eco-tourism, diversity, race, public relations education, global PR

The recent rise of social and political unrest on a global scale has underscored the need for communicators with global and cultural competencies. While public relations educators are tasked with imparting cultural awareness in undergraduate classrooms, the field of public relations itself has been slow to make advancements in diversity, equity and inclusion. “Despite numerous calls and initiatives for change for over three decades, the industry’s D&I needle has barely moved” (Bardhan & Gower, 2020, p. 103).

Public relations educators play a major role in moving the needle. As Pompper (2005) notes, “The status of public relations practice is directly linked to public relations education” (p. 299). And, “Diversity must start at the classroom level in order for emerging practitioners to embrace diversity at the professional level” (Brown et al., 2019, p. 19).

Today’s public relations students are tomorrow’s practitioners, and educators have the ability to positively impact the pipeline from the classroom to the boardroom through exposure to courses and coursework that bring topics of global communication, diversity, equity and inclusion to the forefront. Globalization and a growing environment of inter-linked economies and multinational companies create a heightened demand for public relations students and practitioners to achieve intercultural competence (Ju & Kang, 2021).

Flowers (2020) noted that a number of scholars in the discipline have emphasized the need to teach global perspectives, as well as multicultural, intercultural, and international skills to the public relations students in U.S. classrooms (Bardhan, 2003; Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005; Holbert, & Waymer, 2022; Taylor, 2001; Tsetsura, 2011; Waymer & Brown, 2018; Waymer & Dyson, 2011). In addition, the 2018 Commission on Public Relations Education’s report on undergraduate PR education, *Foundations + Future State. Educators + Practitioners*, notes “Efforts to improve D&I knowledge must start at the academic level. We recommend

educators place focus on how diversity and multicultural perspectives are taught in the classroom, and commit to integrating D&I focused topics and discussions into the curriculum” (p. 139).

The concept of ecotourism presents a way to integrate global perspectives into the public relations classroom. Conservationists, professional organizations, and/or academicians have defined ecotourism in multiple ways based on their study area of tourist behavior (Sirakaya et al., 1999). The first known formal definition of ecotourism is written by Ceballos-Lascuráin (1987) as “Travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas ” (p. 14). In 1994, Andersen defined ecotourism as “a tourism experience infused with the spirit of conservation and cultural change that results in a net positive effect for the environment and local economy...” (p.32). In a more recent article, Khanra and colleagues conducted a bibliometric analysis and literature review of ecotourism and argued that the four critical thematic areas of ecotourism are the ecological preservation of the tourist destination, the carbon footprint from tourist mobility, the protection of residents’ interests in tourist destinations, and tourists’ attitudes and behavior toward sustainability, respectively. This assignment helps students think about all four areas of ecotourism by conducting a deep analysis of a place (a country) and creating sustainable strategies to enhance tourism.

A visit to a safari park such as the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania or Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan (India) are examples of ecotourism as they allow tourists to experience animals in their natural habitat and learn about them firsthand, rather than through documentaries or movies (Verma, 2022).

The Project

This semester-long project, which can be deployed in a face-to-face or online course, provides an opportunity to integrate topics of DEI and global perspectives into a class through a hands-on project. This project was deployed in a Global PR course, but could easily be integrated into a variety of PR courses including PR Writing.

Students are given an objective: research the political, economic, and cultural aspects of a country other than the U.S. and Canada, in order to develop an ecotourism campaign in that country for 18-25-year-old American citizens.

There are two parts of this campaign assignment:

1. Country analysis: students pick a country other than the U.S. and Canada and conduct comprehensive research to understand PR practice in that country.
2. Ecotourism campaign (team-based project): The final assignment asks students to create an ecotourism campaign based on the research conducted in the first part of this assignment. This assignment provides an opportunity for students to work according to the key PR and structural variables of that country, using diverse American residents as the target audience.

This project gives students an opportunity to research, write collaboratively and individually, and peer edit. Throughout the process, students not only develop and refine PR skills but also develop empathy toward other cultures and teamwork skills through open conversations in the class as well as in small groups. The lectures and discussions in the class will allow students to share their intercultural experiences and observations, which also help them to respect other views and backgrounds and develop an effective global PR campaign.

Student Learning Outcomes

- Understand and evaluate information about global public relations

- Identify key global publics and analyze their characteristics
- Plan and conduct global public relations strategies and tactics
- Learn principles to be an effective public relations professional in a global setting
- Create a global public relations campaign

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

Note: One of the authors taught this course twice at a small liberal arts university with four and fourteen students respectively. Evidence of SLOs is limited but authors will continue collecting data in the future.

All students (100%) indicated “agree” or “strongly agree” on “I am more competent in this area after having taken this course.”

Qualitative feedback from course evaluations includes:

- “[The professor] provided us with many case studies and background information that was very helpful in learning about Global Public Relations.”
- “I very much enjoyed the report I got to give on Germany. While my grandmother was a German immigrant, I freely admit that I did not have much knowledge of the country’s economic, political, or cultural systems until conducting additional research.”
- “Your examples, those offered by students, and those you requested I find, all helped me remember both the principles themselves and the realistic applications for them on the global stage.”
- “She brought in speakers and people from other cultures and that worked in different facets of PR, which was really helpful.”
- “I think that because this course was discussion-based, it made the material easy to retain.”

Connection to PR Practice

In our ever-changing media and social media landscape, public relations practitioners need to have a strong understanding of public relations practice in other countries and demonstrate cultural

competencies. The 2017 CPRE report notes that a global perspective is essential today, and career opportunities in the public relations field are available worldwide.

The Global Capability Framework, which is a Global Alliance's benchmark for professionals in public relations and communication management, highlighted the capabilities that professionals hold in common across the world. It states, "to provide contextual intelligence" is an essential capability for PR and communication professionals, in which "you see the bigger picture - socially, culturally, politically, technologically and economically. You identify strategic opportunities and threats, issues and trends. You operate in a connected world, demonstrating broad understanding of local and global diversity in culture, values and beliefs" (Global Alliance, para. 13)

The same study also found that the issues pertaining to businesses and organizations are global today. This indicates that a successful public relations practitioner will have to go global, beginning with the simplest of steps: understanding that public relations practice varies with borders and languages, around the world.

As PR educators work to foster a new generation of public relations practitioners, it has become more important than ever before to address topics of equality and justice by addressing multiculturalism and international diversity in the classrooms.

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Appendix

Assignment

Global Public Relations

Project Overview: Country Analysis and Eco Tourism

Campaign Proposal. Note for professors: Assignments can be adapted to fit any country/region by identifying the country's designated tourism regions.

All students are required to write a comprehensive research report related to public relations practice in the country of their choice. Then, a team of 2-3 students will develop an international eco-tourism campaign for diverse audiences of 18-25-year-old American citizens.

Examples of Eco-Tourism in different countries are:

On YouTube channel of World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), there is a wonderful example of Eco-Tourism video, India - Exceptional Stories of Sustainable Tourism.

Also, on the website of Ecotourism World, there is an article showing different examples of eco-tourism. The name of the article is "5 Inspirational Sustainable Tourism Videos for 2020."

Learning Objective

By writing comprehensive research reports and presentations, the objective is to enhance understanding of global public relations strategies and raise awareness of eco-tourism in the country of students' choice

among 18-25-year-old American citizens.

Assignment Descriptions

Country Analysis [Individual Assignment - report + presentation]

Students are required to conduct thorough research related to a country of their choice. Students will conduct a deep analysis of the public relations practice of their chosen country by understanding various structural variables such as political environment, cultural characteristics, media systems, and economic environment, and also provide an example to substantiate their argument.

The report will elaborate on the history and development of public relations practices in that country, identifying when public relations practices/events began in that country, and examining how public relations is practiced today. Through this exercise, students will be able to identify the most important variables that influenced the practice of public relations in that country.

The research report must include an introduction followed by a brief summary of public relations development in their chosen country and concluding thoughts at the end, focusing on the important variables that they believe most influence the practice of public relations in their chosen country, as mentioned above.

Campaign Proposal (Group Assignment)

As teams, students transition to the role of PR practitioner of their country of choice, and will collaborate to produce a comprehensive international eco-tourism campaign proposal targeting 18-25-year-old American residents, which they will present in class. In consultation with the instructor, each team will select a country and create ONE proposal.

Each student has already done extensive research about his/her/their county in the CCA report assignment. Students will collaborate and can choose either country. Students can make this choice among

themselves. Students will also conduct research related to target audience of 18-25 year old American residents, specifically related to their traveling habits, preferences, and expenditure criterion.

Students will craft a campaign proposal for their chosen country.

Ex: Consider their campaign proposal as a pitch to the decision makers. It should be persuasive (based on research); they should spend thousands of dollars on it.

The key sections are (1) Target audience, (2) Travel campaign “idea” overview- define purpose, (3) context-argument/ justification for the “idea [target nation analysis], (4) SWOT analysis of the country, (5) strategic (implementation) suggestions for the future.