

Teaching Brief

Inter-Institutional Service-Learning Collaborations in a Remote Environment: A Case Study

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With the purpose of giving students real-world experience in teamwork and remote project management pre-pandemic, two instructors taught their undergraduate crisis communication courses collaboratively for an entire semester. Students from comparable public 4-year Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) located in the south-central and southwestern regions of the United States worked together on a service-learning project requiring the development of a crisis communication plan for a client representing a nonprofit organization. The following themes emerged concerning lessons students learned: navigating cultural uncertainty, using tactful communication via technology, managing distance and adapting to challenges. The results correspond with reports by the National Association of Colleges and Employers and the Commission on Public Relations Education emphasizing the importance of preparing students for the challenges posed by a technological work environment. Along with anecdotes from the instructors' observations and students' evaluative comments, suggestions for future applications of this type of service-learning collaboration are provided.

Keywords: service-learning, crisis communication, inter-institutional collaboration, public relations, remote work

The COVID-19 global health pandemic accelerated organizations' adoption of digital technologies, as many nonessential businesses were forced to embrace hybrid and remote work environments to sustain business activities. During the pandemic, nearly 70% of full-time employees in the U.S. worked from home (OWL Labs, 2020). As a result of the work-from-home (WFH) surge, organizations now rely heavily on technology to power connectedness among employees and processes in hybrid and remote work environments, and systems that were once manual are now digital and automated (Craig, 2021).

College graduates face the reality that employers seek new hires with relevant work experience (Craig, 2021) which now includes navigating the plethora of professional technologies required to enable WFH settings. Adequate preparation has challenged college graduates for years and spurred the need for hands-on experiences and internships (Thompson, 2014). While Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are referred to as "Zoomers" because they have grown up in a digital world and are hyperconnected, comfort with technology does not necessarily equate to professional prowess (Gentina & Parry, 2021).

To help students overcome these challenges in preparation for today's job market, educators need to consider modern career readiness competencies and strategies for incorporating opportunities to practice these skills in the classroom. In the context of public relations, scholars have argued that education must include collaboration and industry tools to support PR practices (Formentin & Auger, 2021), as well as "the need to help students learn about their *digital* presence" (Kim, 2022, p. 9). Furthermore, a roundtable workgroup sponsored by the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) argued that "a significant element in public relations education is developing a student's presence to effectively deliver content, lead groups, and engage in interpersonal dimensions online" (Kim, 2022, p. 11).

Service-learning is one high-impact practice (HIPS) shown to help students develop competencies while providing a service for the community that allows for hands-on experience in a real-world situation (Dapena et al., 2022). Through service-learning experiences, students may develop a sense of personal and social responsibility and work ethic, retention of course content, the ability to apply theory to practice, and leadership and communication skills (Jacoby, 2015). In fact, researchers have found that service-learning and collaborative learning approaches “can successfully bridge academic concepts and practice” (Maresh-Fuehrer, 2015, p. 187) by fostering an environment where students take personal initiative, become a better team member or emerge as a team leader, and feel connected to their community (Johnson, 2007; Maresh-Fuehrer, 2015).

While many researchers have studied the benefits of service-learning in singular classrooms and across academic departments and colleges, an exploration of inter-institutional collaborative versions of this teaching practice is lacking (Chang & Hannafin, 2015). Some researchers have found that inter-institutional collaborations result in unique benefits (Fraustino et al., 2015), so it is worthwhile to explore how such a collaboration addresses the need for exposing students to the technological practices required in today’s professional environment.

Thus, the following case study reflects on a collaborative semester-long service-learning partnership led by two instructors at comparable, public 4-year Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) in different regions of the United States. Although this remote collaboration occurred pre-pandemic, the results provide important support for the CPRE recommendations for online pedagogy and guidance on how to improve such instruction.

University and Student Comparisons

This service-learning project was implemented in senior-level

crisis communication courses at two accredited universities located in the south-central and southwestern regions of the United States. Because of their geographic locations, the campuses are in two different time zones with a one-hour time difference. One institution is a comprehensive university located on a tri-institutional commuter campus with 95% of its students coming from in-state. The other institution is a research university that has both on-campus and commuter students, with 93% of its students coming from in-state. More than 40% of enrollment at both institutions is first-generation college students, and both are federally designated Hispanic Serving Institutions. However, the differences in geographic locations and student characteristics made this collaboration particularly appealing to the instructors. The class at the southwestern university was composed of 11 upper-division journalism and public relations majors. Each of the enrolled students had completed several courses in AP style and journalism-centric writing techniques. Conversely, the south-central university class featured 39 students from a variety of majors, many of them had limited or no experience in public relations or journalism writing but with backgrounds working in related industries such as emergency response.

Service-Learning Project

Prior Applications

Prior to embarking on this collaboration, both instructors modeled their crisis communication courses to involve team projects and a semester-long service-learning experience where students develop crisis communication plans for community-based clients. As such, both instructors were familiar with choosing appropriate clients for service-learning projects and how to balance client needs with student learning outcomes.

Curriculum Coordination

Curriculum coordination began approximately one year in advance

of the project. Since students would be registering for the course at their home university, the instructors felt it was important to discuss the time zone difference and try to teach the courses at the same time to build in time for team teaching and collaboration. However, an unanticipated challenge arose when scheduling courses as both institutions use specific time blocks, none of which were shared between campuses. As a result, the instructors selected times when the classes could overlap for 30 minutes. In the class periods leading up to a major assignment deadline, students were expected to use the overlapping time to work together and submit a report to both instructors detailing their progress.

The next step required examining course syllabi and policies, discussion content and grading rubrics with the purpose of creating a unified voice between the classes. Each syllabus incorporated the same policies, resources, deadlines and expectations except for university-mandated statements. Both instructors shared lecture notes and determined the content to be taught but, recognizing that no two instructors share the same teaching style, allowed for individuality in selecting examples and instructional methods. All documents were shared with both classes in their independent Blackboard shells. Several class periods were scheduled via Zoom to provide the students with an opportunity to participate in lessons taught by both instructors. In these class periods, the instructor in charge of the lesson for that day broadcast their lecture live via Zoom, while the other instructor and their students were sitting together in their own classroom, attending via Zoom.

New grading rubrics were also developed for each of the assignments. During the semester, the instructors graded each group assignment separately and then discussed and agreed upon scores before providing a unified grade to students. Little to no variation in the instructors' individual scores occurred.

Technology and Collaboration

In addition to the Zoom class meetings, students used a variety of technology applications to communicate and collaborate outside the classroom, including the text messaging app, GroupMe. Students were encouraged to post questions and examples in a class group and create subgroups for discussions within their assigned teams. Students were also encouraged to participate in an optional Twitter discussion using a unique hashtag for the course. To encourage collaboration, students were prompted to share something interesting they learned in class or in the readings, an example of a course concept or commentary about a crisis that was not discussed in class. Fourteen students (28% of the class) contributed 119 posts with an average applause rate (likes) of 1.96. While the engagement rate is modest, it is worth noting that the students' examples were referenced during class sessions to spark face-to-face discussion. Also of interest is the fact that many of the engagements were from persons who were not members of either class, thus evidencing increased visibility of the institutions and the PR profession among students' networks.

The Assignments

The instructors used the crisis management plan (CMP) project developed by Maresh-Fuehrer (2013), which consists of four major assignments and a written/oral presentation to a client. Three of the assignments required students to work in different groups to collaborate, and one assignment allowed for individual work. Since group work can be daunting for students, the instructors assigned the most graded weight to the individual assignment. The instructors used a shared rubric to independently grade each team's work and then briefly met to discuss and finalize scores and feedback before issuing grades to the teams. Students were told that their team assignments were being graded collaboratively by both instructors. However, for the individual assignments, instructors

used a shared rubric but only graded the work of students enrolled in their class sections. Students were required to complete revisions of each assignment based on the feedback they received. The revisions were compiled into a Google document that students presented to the client at the end of the semester.

Results

A component of service learning is reflecting on what has been learned and how it applies to a real-world project. The instructors' observations of student communication coupled with comments from student reports of instruction (SRIs) suggested that students gained individual insights and exercised newly acquired skills from the challenges posed when collaborating with peers in another region to complete a major academic project for a real client.

Navigating Cultural Uncertainty

The first learning experience for students emerged during the early weeks of the semester. While the instructors expected students to share their excitement about the collaboration, a different attitude was apparent. An "us versus them" mentality seemed to dominate students' communication about their classmates and the project. Students at both institutions emphasized the difference in geographic regions by referring to the collaborating class as the "[State] class" or "[State] students," rather than using inclusive language such as "our class" or "our group." The tone was negative and competitive and became most obvious during a situation where a few teams submitted late assignments, despite the instructors' shared policy on late work. The students tasked with submitting the assignments on behalf of the teams were all from the same campus, so the students from the collaborating campus expressed anger at the fact that the "[State] students" were negatively impacting their grades. Some students even used stereotyping to make sense of the experience, saying things like "You'd think people from [State] would be more laidback."

This language and behavior seemed to signal the existence of implicit cultural bias among students, which was especially exposed due to the teams being geographically dispersed. However, this allowed the instructors to engage in a discussion with all of the students about recognizing how cultural differences may impact communication among the members of their teams, respecting those differences and knowing when personal accountability can be used to avoid conflict. After having this talk with the classes, the instructors observed an increase in communication between the groups and more individual students demonstrating accountability. One student shared, “This course really demonstrated ‘real world’ situations when working with groups of different backgrounds. Involved VERY tactful communications within the groups and individuals. Conflict resolution was tested to the extreme.” However, it is unclear whether the students ever fully escaped the “us versus them” mentality, as one student reflected, “There were times that working with [State] class was a little difficult, but we worked it out and made it happen - that proved to be a learning experience in itself.”

Using Tactful Communication via Technology

Students were overall receptive and comfortable using new technologies, such as GroupMe and Zoom to communicate with their classmates; however, they were faced with differing expectations for communicating on these platforms. For example, students experienced a great deal of conflict when communicating using GroupMe. A specific anecdote occurred early in the semester when students formed their initial groups for the organizational history assignment. Students from one campus were using the app for casual/social messaging, such as connecting with each other to identify their location (such as studying in the student union or eating lunch at a particular restaurant). This irritated some students who were not on the same campus, prompting them to post derogatory comments that sparked even more unrelated text exchanges

that further created division among the classes. One student wrote, “The smaller chats worked better but still had problems, like people using it to find what room they should meet in. I think a training on how to use group chats would help these problems.”

Thus, when this issue arose, the instructors used class time to discuss professional text messaging conduct and provided a handout that offered tips for professional engagement. They also directly addressed concerns with select students and prompted the students to reflect on how they may have approached their text responses differently. As the semester continued, students adapted to the norms for professional technology use and realized that tactful communication was necessary on these platforms, especially to resolve misunderstandings. At the end of the semester, one student shared, “TIL [today I learned] collaboration can actually go smoothly across time zones when communication is respectful. Looking back, this project has taught me more than I thought...”

Managing Distance

For each assignment, students were randomly grouped with classmates from both campuses. During class, the students who shared a physical location would coordinate their schedules and select out-of-class meeting times to work together on their assignments. The ease of communicating with classmates that shared a physical location made it common for them to forget to reach out to the remote group members. This resulted in frustration when the classmates who were left out of the arrangements were unable to meet at the time their group chose to work on the assignment. When referring to this scenario, one student described, “Working with the...team was difficult because there were some instances where they were not willing to support team work. There were a few times where it was hard to communicate with them.”

This dynamic opened the pathway to discussing the differences between collaborating virtually and face-to-face. When the instructors

learned of this, they quickly reminded the students of the importance of including everyone in conversations that impact the team or the project. They utilized an analogy of the students being stakeholders in the project and connected this to the core public relations principle of the need to inform stakeholders about matters that concern them (Center et al., 2012). The instructors expressed that the communication tools available—such as GroupMe—are meant for fostering collaboration, especially in these types of moments.

Adapting to Challenges

When the instructors approached their classes about a lack of participation in team meetings, several students shared that they were uncomfortable in virtual meetings because they could see themselves while talking and became self-conscious. Sharing these challenges in the classroom helped students realize that others had the same feelings. The instructors shared tips for navigating this situation, such as hiding the self-view on Zoom.

A second challenge that emerged was based on student characteristics (differing class sizes, majors and PR writing experience). The instructors observed several benefits and challenges students faced as a result of this mixed class configuration. The heterogeneous nature of the group contributed to the discovery of a robust set of potential risks (335 unique risk scenarios) that illustrated students' specialized knowledge of the law, environmental science and other technical risks that may not have otherwise been considered in a class of only PR/journalism majors. At times, however, students in both courses approached the instructors with frustrations over the varying degrees of professional writing skills, AP style proficiency and personal worth ethic present among their classmates. Some students reported that they made extensive edits to their group's work, while others expressed frustration that their individual contributions had been edited to a degree that changed the intended meaning of their

content. These concerns led to the instructors discussing the nature of collaborative projects in the workplace, which included a discussion of French and Raven's (1959) bases of power. The instructors emphasized that professionals often work with people from different departments and locations that may not share the same knowledge base. However, each person must be valued for the unique strengths that they contribute toward the success of a group. At the end of the semester, one of the students shared about the remote work experience, "Working with different individuals throughout the semester helped me jump out of my comfort zones." Another student emphasized that the challenging nature of group work was "a real example of how life may work sometime." Much to the instructors' satisfaction, one student shared:

This class was a favorite of mine this semester! It was definitely a challenge every minute, but it taught me so much in just a short 4 months. I learned how to work with various individuals on a large project with a wonderful outcome.

Discussion

As Kim (2022) describes in the Commission on Public Relations Education's Spotlight Report, "online education should prepare students to develop their digital presence by providing opportunities to learn about, practice, and reflect on digital interaction" (p. 11). Since COVID-19, the professional world—including education—has seen a rise in the use of different modalities to collaborate with workgroups. Although the project described in this case study was a remote collaboration that only partially took place online, the lessons learned from this inter-institutional project show that this approach makes it possible for instructors to expose students to the "ways that remote and hybrid workplaces practice presence across teams and between managers and their teams" (Kim, 2022, p. 9).

The students' experiences are consistent with previous research on the benefits of service-learning and inter-institutional collaborations

as “mirroring the type of work PR professionals regularly perform” (Smallwood & Brunner, 2017, p. 450) and providing mutual benefit to the students and client (Maresh-Fuehrer, 2015); however, the added component of remote collaboration resulted in several added benefits. Students were suddenly thrust into an environment where communication deficiencies were realized. They had to learn to adapt to cultural uncertainty, differing skills and communication expectations, and challenges posed by geographic distance and their own insecurities. As Berger and Calabrese (1975) explain, people feel uncertainty about others that they do not know. Given the nature of the collaboration, students anticipated future interaction with one another, so their interest in reducing uncertainty was high. Unfortunately, the brief overlap between the two classes provided only limited opportunities for verbal and nonverbal warmth and self-disclosure among students. Additionally, moments of conflict—such as in the cases of the frustrated GroupMe messages or late assignment submissions—may have led to uncertainty remaining high, despite the collaborative environment. This challenge is important to overcome because a sense of closeness results in higher contributions from students (Gilmore & Warren, 2007).

Another advantage of the collaboration was the numerous teaching moments the instructors were able to have with students to help them navigate challenges, as described in the Results section. This corresponds with the CPRE’s recommendation to incorporate “topics such as leading a Zoom presentation, nonverbal communication through technology, and other elements that hold the potential to elevate or inhibit their future success” into online instruction (Kim, 2022, p. 11). This seems especially important as the instructors observed that, although both classes were mostly comprised of “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), it became clear that students did not understand how professional technology use differs from personal use. Overcoming this issue is necessary, as “students’

efficacy with the technologies...may lead to...positive attitudes and performance expectations when using such technologies in future on-the-job environments” (O’Malley & Kelleher, 2002, p. 183).

In many cases, diversity in skill sets were an asset in helping students avoid groupthink, which occurs when a homogenous group of people allow the desire for harmony in the group to result in poor decision-making (Janis, 1997). The instructors observed students gaining insight into their strengths that required them to recognize how they operate within a team (e.g., do they take on a leadership role or do they hold back their questions or concerns? Do they criticize others’ work, or do they help improve the end product?). Students arrived at these realizations by being asked to regularly reflect on their experiences throughout the class and during the instructors’ one-on-one or team conversations with them when concerns arose. These discoveries helped students understand how to be more effective team players and work through disagreements and miscommunication, regardless of the geolocation of their team members. More research is needed on the benefits and pitfalls associated with learning in remote inter-institutional service-learning activities, especially when students have varying levels of competency.

Another significant contribution of this project is the experience and benefits afforded to students while requiring few additional resources beyond what is normally required to manage a classroom. While O’Malley and Kelleher (2002) remarked that “the extra resources required to coordinate two distant university classes did not seem worthwhile...” (p. 183), the instructors of the CMP project did not arrive at the same conclusion. The primary resource required to formulate and run this class was time. The instructors developed their own syllabi to reflect university-specific language and classroom conduct expectations but collaborated on the development of each assignment, rubric, and grading structure, and determining audio and video technology requirements to sync classrooms.

Each instructor also prepared lectures for joint classroom instruction, and the instructors graded some of the projects together to ensure consistency in evaluation. When student concerns arose, the instructors took time to turn them into teaching moments, but these lessons did not exceed what would normally occur as part of classroom management.

Recommendations for Future Applications

The areas where students struggled present opportunities to improve the design of a PR curriculum focused on providing students with real-world experiences. Based on their shared experience, the instructors offer the following recommendations for future applications of inter-institutional service-learning projects.

Schedule Time for Team Building. As evidenced by the exemplars provided in the Results section, students struggled with aspects of intercultural communication which, at times, contributed to a feeling of hostility among students. The intense course schedule necessary to cover the material allowed little room for team building exercises. The instructors agree with the need to integrate team-building exercises into the curriculum to build trust, develop team identity and promote information exchange to help improve virtual team dynamics (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998). Students would also benefit from a discussion of the similarities and differences among the institutions and student skill sets, as well as more specifications for assigning roles and deadlines and streamlining communication when working in groups.

Discuss Professional Technology Use. Collaboration, especially in a virtual environment, requires guidance and some level of oversight by instructors. Initially, the instructors believed setting communication parameters, such as establishing a GroupMe text channel, offered sufficient room for students to successfully connect. However, instructors quickly found that students would have benefited from more information about what constitutes professional communication in mediated platforms.

Additionally, students' lack of comfort seeing themselves on Zoom also supports the notion of teaching them how to use technology. This finding is especially salient, as the CPRE report discusses the need to help students learn "how to do direct engagement with groups in virtual settings, how to leverage software...for successful group projects, and what effective Zoom engagement looks like in various professional settings" (Kim, 2022, p. 9).

Balance Class Sizes. Furthermore, the instructors would recommend considering comparable class sizes as a factor in selecting a cross-collaboration partner. A lack of balance in class size resulted in lopsided group representation. The natural in-person collaboration that occurred among students in the larger class meant the students in the smaller class often reported feeling out-of-sync with their teams. According to O'Leary and Cummings (2007), it is common for geographically dispersed teams to experience unequal distribution across locations. As the National Research Council (2015) explains, this results in a phenomenon called the "hub and spoke model," where the "culture and communication style of the headquarters typically dominate, and the group members at remote locations may experience lower status and less power, while their needs and progress are invisible to others" (p. 154-155). In this case, the larger class seemed to be perceived as the main class or a centralized "hub," where the smaller class' students felt as though they were just the "spokes" feeding into the larger hub, though this was not the case.

Course Extensions. By fine-tuning aspects of communication and balancing the size of teams, an international inter-institutional course is possible. Such a course would enhance students' exposure to different cultures, ethnicities, communication nuances, social norms and technologies in a way that extends what they are able to experience working with students in another region of the same country. According

to Molleda (2009), gaining a broad understanding of the global economy and standards of communication practices in various regions of the world is increasingly important. This data is confirmed by the career readiness competencies outlined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in its job outlook report: career & self development, communication, critical thinking, equity & inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork and technology (NACE, 2021).

In sum, while data exists illustrating the benefits of service-learning, little information exists about the value of experiential learning in a remote inter-institutional environment. With globalization and the ability to telework expanding, it is imperative for students to learn how to work collaboratively and virtually and with people who are different from them (Kim, 2022; NACE, 2021). With structured facilitation of such projects, remote inter-institutional collaborations are a highly effective method for honing the interpersonal and technological skills required in today's workforce.

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