Infusing Real-world Social Issues and Ethics into Research Methods Instruction

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ABSTRACT

In the last few years, the US social climate has been shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as social unrest due to racial injustice. As instructors of a research methods course that traditionally focused on the needs of corporate clients, we wondered how these developments could inspire a new learning experience for students that encourages them to develop research skills through responding more directly to major life disruptions and the inequities revealed. We aimed to avoid compounding challenges our students faced while also giving them knowledge and skills that would empower them to address diversity and ethics in their future work as public relations professionals (CPRE, 2018). The result is a semester-long project that asks students to critically engage with questions of ethics and inequalities in research methods.

Keywords: research, ethics, diversity, inclusion

GIFT Overview

Our classrooms are spaces where students can practice using research skills to navigate the realities of our social world rather than reify false notions of neutrality, whether in research and strategic communication or in education as a whole (Freire, 2018). This GIFT asks students to spend their time and effort addressing significant social issues, including issues that coincide with current events and those that reflect a prior interest or passion for the student. The project increases student engagement by helping them see the research methods they learn as relevant to current challenges, and students build self-efficacy as they apply course objectives in reframing a societal obstacle as an opportunity for a positive impact (Anderson, 2004; Ineson et al., 2013; Leston-Bandiera, 2013; Chowdhury, n.d.). Students leave the course understanding how research methods are relevant to issues they care about and confident in their ability to conduct ethical, inclusive public relations research in their careers.

Assignment Rationale

Our primary objective in designing this assignment is to improve student engagement in public relations research methods courses. Although we were initially driven by the need to engage students during the shift to remote learning during COVID, improving engagement is always especially desirable in methods courses, which our students frequently cite as the most challenging. Our primary intervention is asking students to choose an organization and PR issue they find personally relevant for their semester-long project. By giving students a greater say in developing their project and the ability to choose a topic relevant to their career goals, we expect to see increased engagement and self-efficacy (Anderson, 2004; Leston-Bandiera, 2013). This increased sense of ownership will lead them to develop better research skills and feel confident applying those skills in professional settings as well as help

them build ethics knowledge with an eye to real-world effects.

A second, and complementary, goal in designing this assignment is to better students' ability to apply their research skills beyond the classroom as they move into careers as communication professionals. We hope that asking students to work on projects that they see as aligned with their personal interests and career goals will lead them to think critically about the potential strengths and weaknesses of each method as it might be employed in the real-world contexts they will eventually face. We ask students to go beyond designing and executing the most ideal version of a study and to instead grapple with the challenges of applying those research methods to more realistic business cases.

Finally, we considered what the increased social unrest due to racial injustice meant for our students, both as they completed coursework and as they prepared to enter the world as early career communicators. At a minimum, we felt that all students needed to consider ethics with an eye toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and we updated our research ethics accordingly. We also encouraged – but did not require – students to take on DEI questions in their project selection. Pushing or requiring students to choose DEI topics would have risked undermining our first two goals. But for students who chose to pursue these questions, the semester-long assignment provided an opportunity for deeper engagement.

Future instructors could choose to implement one of these interventions without committing to both of them. Project choice in itself can improve student agency, even if it is not explicitly connected to future career goals, social issues or questions of DEI. And of course, giving students the opportunity to work on projects that emulate real-world campaigns helps students build confidence applying research methods in practice, regardless of whether they are invested in the particular topic.

Bringing these three elements together, however, has the added benefit of encouraging students to think about ethics and equity in terms

of their own goals and aspirations, hopefully preparing them to take those ideas to a career of their choice. Further, the interventions that allow for all three elements are synergistic rather than in conflict; each has the potential to improve the others' effects.

Assignment Learning Objectives

- Learning Objective 1 (abbreviated as LO 1):
  - Students increase their capacity to connect coursework to professional success in future careers.
- Learning Objective 2 (abbreviated as LO 2):
  - Students develop research and analytic skills.
- Learning Objective 3 (abbreviated as LO 3):
  - Students develop ethics and diversity/inclusion knowledge.
- Learning Objective 4 (abbreviated as LO 4):
  - Students increase confidence in their ability to employ new skills and knowledge in their future careers.

Connection to Public Relations Practice or Theory

Research and analytic skills, ethics knowledge, and diversity and inclusion knowledge are three of the qualities employers most desire in entry-level public relations professionals, yet many college graduates enter the workforce without a strong understanding of relevant research methods or how they relate to ethics and inclusion (CPRE, 2018). Investigations find that, in particular, communication practitioners do not consistently employ research methods to measure and evaluate the success of their messaging (Thorson et al., 2015). These disconnects, however, are not because public relations curricula lack research methods training; in fact, more than 90 percent of undergraduate programs require a research methods course (CPRE, 2018).

Instead, research suggests that students frequently struggle to actually learn the research skills covered in these courses, in part because they do not understand how the material relates to their existing

knowledge or future goals (Markle, 2017; see Early, 2014 for meta-analysis). As a result, it is difficult for students to integrate new concepts into their worldview, and they are less motivated to engage with course materials.

Additionally, when students enter the working world, they may not see these research tools as ways to improve their messaging but as potentially undermining their contributions (Nothhaft & Stennson, 2019). We posit that teaching research methods in a vacuum, disconnected from students' goals and interests, may exacerbate this problem.

By asking students to choose an organization and topic that feel relevant to them, we improve student learning, connecting research and analytic skills and ethics knowledge developed in the course to their existing knowledge, real-world experience, and future goals (Anderson, 2004; Leston-Bandeira, 2013). Students more clearly recognize how the information they are learning might apply directly to their future careers, and they build confidence in their ability to apply those skills in the workplace.

Employers increasingly feel that DEI training must be embedded in all aspects of business and communication education rather than treated as a separate topic (Ragas, 2023). This GIFT addresses this need by incorporating questions of diversity and inclusion into the study of research ethics and, in many cases, as a core component of the issue students choose to address for their semester topic.

How the Assignment was Class-Tested

The activity consists of reshaping a semester-long, client-based project, providing opportunities for students to rethink the values that usually underlie research courses in strategic communication. It was class tested in two 30-person undergraduate Advertising/Public Relations Research Methods classes.

In the traditional course, over sixteen weeks, lectures on research

methods including focus groups, interviews, ethnography, surveys, and experiments were each followed by a graded assignment conducted individually or in a group. Due to COVID-19, we reimagined the class as an asynchronous remote course, as many other instructors had. Our new design aimed to increase online engagement and make the course feel relevant by giving students opportunity to think deeply about real-world issues across two core course elements that encompassed the GIFT:

- Choosing a client and issue related to a current social issue,
- Learning about research ethics issues that have involved BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities,

Each group was required to select a client engaged with a relevant social issue that they would like to address throughout the semester. A relevant social issue was defined as an important problem for discussion that is closely connected to the current time and affects human society (Dictionary.com, n.d.a; Dictionary.com, n.d.b; Dictionary.com, n.d.c). The social issue could but did not have to be related to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion).

Once clients and issues were approved, each group refined a research problem to address on behalf of their client over the course of the semester. As we covered each method, students posed research questions which could be best answered with that method and which deepened their understanding and built on their previous work. There were three phases of research assignments: Secondary Data (background research project), Qualitative Primary Data (focus group, in-depth interview, participant observation/ethnography), and Quantitative Primary Data (survey, experiment). These assignments led to a reflection assignment that allowed students to speak to the value of the unique aspects of the course (i.e. social issue and diverse research ethics) and a final project (presentation and paper) that synthesized the previous assignments and provided recommendations for their clients' advertising or PR effort.

Maintaining the advocacy focus, the reframed project was complemented by content highlighting the perspectives of marginalized or minoritized communities. Each week, in addition to working toward graded assignments, students were prepared to engage fully in discussion activities including contributing written or video recorded posts in the internal message forum for the class. We reworked the section of the course examining research ethics to include socially relevant aspects. For example, previous ethics modules centered studies involving white researchers and participants (e.g., the Milgram and Stanford Prison Experiments). We added the "Tuskegee Experiment" to our case studies and included new sections on "Black Women & Medicinal Experimentation" and "Research Ethics and Exploitation in Developing Countries" (see sample assignment titled Research Ethics through Diverse Experiences). We also provided an assignment that allowed students to reflect on the knowledge they gained over the semester including what was most valuable, what outstanding questions they had, and what was most relevant to their personal and professional life. These opportunities allowed students to further consider their professional futures as well as discuss ethical considerations addressed during the semester.

Evidence of Learning Outcomes/Assessment

Evidence of learning outcomes was demonstrated through qualitative student feedback that aligned with key learning objectives. Students said the course felt especially relevant compared to other courses they had taken. They emphasized that focusing on real-world issues (in this case, DEI related) was important to them and made understanding concepts easier (LO 1, LO 3). Students indicated that having a topic that was meaningful to them and relevant to current events made it easier for them to engage with course topics.

Notably, the GIFT served as the bridge between course content

taught by us as instructors and the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that public relations practitioners value (specifically, research skills and ethics knowledge). Students believed that choosing the social issue related topic made their explorations of the various research methods especially engaging (LO 2, LO 4). Furthermore, the topics covered in the ethics section worked to deepen their appreciation for the related discussion activities. Students said that the expanded ethics section was especially engaging and made them think more seriously about the importance of ethics in research.

The perceived relevance of the GIFT provided the glue of engagement and self-efficacy needed to bring about the intended outcomes. Additionally, the ethics section provided food for thought about diversity, equity, and inclusion that could guide subsequent research.

Importantly, the students also said that the GIFT better prepared them for entry-level positions in their field. Students felt that they could use the project as an example on their resume and in job applications. Some also indicated that it made them stronger candidates as they entered the job market, with one noting that the project prepared them for an interview, allowing them to speak about hands-on work employing multiple research methods that they would need to use over the course of a campaign if hired.

The feedback students provided suggests that they found this approach meaningful and exciting, even at a time when they faced more remote classwork that could make staying engaged difficult.

Template Assignment Guides

There are three template assignments:
- Client/Issue Choice Opportunity
- Research Ethics through Diverse Experiences Activity
- Reflection Assignment

Client/Issue Choice Opportunity

Learning Outcomes

- Define team goals and expectations for group work
- Collaborate toward the selection of an organization/client
- Create research topic based on a social issue impacting an organization/client

Assignment Description

This semester you will have the opportunity to focus on a client's engagement with a major social movement or current event. Each group will be required to select a client engaged with a relevant social issue that you would like to address throughout the semester.

A relevant social issue will be defined as an important problem for discussion that is closely connected to the current time and affects human society (Dictionary.com, n.d.a; Dictionary,com n.d.b, Dictionary.com, n.d.c).

Assignment Requirements

First, you will fill out a survey that will assess your personal project preferences including your skills, interests, and the social issues which you are most passionate about. After being assigned to groups based on your preferences and completing a team charter, your group will decide on and submit your top three clients and potential research topics for my final approval.

Once confirmed, your group will further refine a research problem to address throughout the semester. With each assignment, you will pose research questions that can be addressed using the research methods covered in the course. The research you conduct will involve how your client is responding to a social issue (as defined above).

Each potential client that your group identifies should fall under one of the following categories:

- This client should consider addressing [relevant social issue]

through strategic communication research,

- This client is currently addressing [relevant social issue] and should assess their effectiveness through strategic communication research, or
- This client is involved in a corporate crisis/situation related to [relevant social issue] that should be addressed through strategic communication research.

The client can be a for-profit or nonprofit organization. It should be an organization that is big enough to have a media footprint. The social issue can but does not have to be related to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). It can be any social issue (e.g. anti-Black racism, climate change, disability justice, animal rights, bullying etc.). However, it should be a problem that requires strategic communication research to solve.

Research Ethics through Diverse Experiences Activity

Learning Outcomes

- Increase understanding of ethical considerations involved in research through diverse perspectives/examples.
- Connect ethical considerations to the professional world.
- Connect ethical considerations to your research project.

Assignment Description

You will discuss the ways in which learning about these unethical studies inform your understanding of communication research ethics.

Assignment Requirements

Please read and/or watch at least two videos or articles from the subsections below. Afterward, use the discussion questions listed below for this week's forum post.

Seminal infamous experiments

View BOTH of the following:

- [The Milgram Experiment](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr5cjyokVUs)
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yr5cjyokVUs

- Stanford Prison Experiment
  https://www.vox.com/2018/6/13/17449118/stanford-prison-experiment-fraud-psychology-replication

View ONE of the following:

- The Tuskegee Study - Black History in Two Minutes
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afwK2CVpc9E
- Voices of the Tuskegee Study
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e5VfgsGp1k
  Time code: 1:02 - 4:20

Black Women & Medicine in America

View ONE of the following:

- The US Medical System is Still Haunted By Slavery
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfYRzxeMdGs
- Henrietta Lacks: The Woman with the Immortal Cells
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3kR2dMCfOM

Research ethics and exploitation in developing countries

Read ONE of the following:

- Ethics vs Economics: The Cost of Outsourcing Clinical Trials to Developing Countries
  https://theconversation.com/ethics-vs-economics-the-cost-of-outsourcing-clinical-trials-to-developing-countries-43246
- Issues of Research Ethics in the Developing World
  https://www.longdom.org/open-access/issues-of-research-ethics-in-developing-world-2157-2518-1000e113.pdf

Discussion Questions (Post answers in forum discussion)

- What is the importance of discussing ethics in research?
- Describe some historical instances of unethical research practices. Include any important takeaways.
- What are the risks of participating in research?
- Now that you have engaged with these case studies and seen the

potential for harm related to conducting research, what can you take from this to ensure that you are being ethical in the research you design for your project?

- How does the general topic of ethics relate to the client organization your group chose for this semester?
- How could the general topic of ethics inform your future professional goals?

Reflection Assignment

Due by [DATE] at [TIME]

This assignment will provide you an opportunity to reflect on the knowledge you have gained this semester - what has been valuable to you, what you have questions about, and what is relevant to your personal and professional life. Please write at least one single-spaced page total (note, bullet point indents and the questions below do not count toward the page count). You can feel free to write more than one-page.

Reflecting on the readings, summary guide, engagement activities, slide notes, instructor videos, and additional content provided and discussed through the semester:

1. Please discuss knowledge you have gained in each of the following areas:
   - Understanding of secondary research
   - Understanding of qualitative analysis
   - Understanding and quantitative analysis
   - The uses and benefits of using research to answer advertising and/or PR questions.
2. Please discuss how examining ethics from a range of diverse perspectives impacted the execution of your research assignments. For example, you can discuss the impact it had on the overall direction of your research (e.g. what your group decided to address). You could also discuss the impact it had on how you approached specific research aspects (e.g. designing research

questions, interacting with research participants, etc.).

3. Please discuss any outstanding questions you have or points of confusion regarding any topic discussed in the course so far. I will provide additional feedback. If you have no outstanding questions, discuss how you have been able to gain clarity and better understand the meaning of the topics or texts discussed so far this semester.

4. Please discuss the aspects of the course that have been most valuable to you so far this semester, including how any of the topics or materials covered so far relate to your life, the communities to which you belong, and/or your career aspirations.

Assignment Grading Criteria or Rubric

Client/Issue Choice Opportunity

This client preference activity accounts for 2.5% of the student's total grade (pass/fail). To receive credit for the client/issue choice, students must submit three potential clients (falling under one of the three listed categories) and the corresponding social issue to be researched for each. Alternatively, the assignment can be viewed as a low stakes engagement opportunity used to develop a graded assignment.

Research Ethics through Diverse Experiences Activity

This research ethics forum response activity is one of ten responses that accounts for 5% of the student's total grade. Students receive full credit for each one as long as they address each part of the prompt and respond to a classmate. Alternatively, the assignment can be viewed as a low stakes engagement opportunity used to develop a graded assignment.

Reflection Assignment

This Reflection Assignment accounts for 10% of the student's total grade. Grading will be based on the accuracy of the information provided in question one and the substantiveness of the responses to questions two through four.

Teaching Note

Intended Courses

Advertising/Public Relations research methods; Undergraduate communication research methods

Best Practices of Implementing the Assignment

We made a decision to require that each student engage with a social issue, rather than to "strongly suggest" or to allow opting out. We took this stance because we felt strongly that engaging successfully in the professional field (and in society in general) will increasingly require young adults to step outside of the comfortable and agreeable. However, we balanced this decision with a variety of student choice moments that allowed students to maintain agency and equity in the course. For example, groups were assigned based on students' responses to a survey about project preferences, including issues about which they were most passionate. Student groups were provided autonomy in selecting clients, which could be any for-profit or nonprofit organizations with a significant media footprint. The activity design asked each group to work together to decide on three client/issue ideas with justifications for each. The instructors then selected one of the three ideas for the students to continue to develop.

Notably, the social issue could be but did not have to be related to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). Setting tight parameters around the type of client and issue the students chose could have resulted in students feeling pressure to choose issues perceived as important to the instructors. Instead, we welcomed a range of social issues as long as they could be addressed with strategic communication research. Broad parameters ensured students chose issues engaging for them (e.g., climate change, disability justice, animal rights, bullying etc.). Yet, our approach allowed for students to explore DEI by choice. For example, one student in a group researching diversity in NASCAR shared:

I want to say that I already valued diversity in research, but this course has furthered my appreciation for it. Especially when finding that a great deal of research associated with our client has been focused on the white feminist perspective in branding and social change, rather than further inclusion of factors like race and ethnicity.

Furthermore, the way we framed our approach—as an "opportunity" for students to "choose" to delve into social issues paired with "understanding" the unethical research experiences of people from minoritized communities (as well as completing a team charter detailing an approach for working well together)—seemed to prepare students to be inclusive and ethical themselves. Because of our approach, students–including our underrepresented students–felt not only accommodated but empowered. For example, after discussing her group's decision to choose a DEI related social issue, the Black student mentioned earlier continued by expressing her gratitude for our approach–while bridging key aspects of the GIFT in her response (i.e. student engagement toward addressing PR, exploring a social issue and practicing ethics and inclusion):

I enjoyed our focus group because we asked sensitive questions that are generally avoided. In our focus groups, [the] majority of our participants strayed away from questions of diversity and race, but it started a conversation. Another factor is that there were no persons of color in our focus group which is an important part of providing solutions. Research participants should come from diverse backgrounds because one opinion and point of view does not speak for all. Thank you for allowing our research topics to be centered around the current racial climate that we live in today.

We opted for open-ended ethics discussion questions that allowed students to engage in deep reflection beyond a regurgitation of course concepts (see Research Ethics through Diverse Experiences Activity).

However, the original discussion questions did not directly ask about relevance specifically to the research project/client and career goals. We also opted for reflection questions that allowed students to engage in contemplation about knowledge they gained over the semester without being primed by the instructor (see Reflection Assignment). The original reflection prompts did not explicitly ask students to address ethics and diverse perspectives. However, students' responses organically included references to ethics and inclusion. For example, a student mentioned their group contemplating whether or not to ask women at a shelter about their abuse experiences (ultimately, going a different route after further reflection on their research goals). Another student discussed their group grappling with not having the proper survey sample for questions meant to address size-inclusive clothing for a popular women's athleisure brand (and their decision to acknowledge this limitation in the write up of their data). Going forward, we would consider including a specific prompt to further allow for reflection related to DEI and ethics. Questions in this document were revised to support the aim of balancing reflectiveness and learning objectives (without leading the students to specific conclusions).

Recommended Resources Related to the Assignment

Watch

Crash Course [CrashCourse] (2018, April 18). *Henrietta Lacks,*
        the Tuskegee experiment, and ethical data collection: Crash
        course statistics #12 [Video]. YouTube.
        https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzNANZnoiRs

Read

Scharff, D. P., Mathews, K. J., Jackson, P., Hoffsuemmer, J., Martin, E.,
        & Edwards, D. (2010). More than Tuskegee: understanding
        mistrust about research participation. Journal of health care for the
        poor and underserved, 21(3), 879–897.
        https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.0.0323

Limitations/Challenges of Implementing the Assignment

The COVID-19 pandemic allowed for an innovative spirit that led to the development of this GIFT but also presented certain challenges. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the exploration of certain methods was curtailed. For example, there were workarounds needed for methods like ethnography or interviewing. Because the information needed to be delivered asynchronously due to COVID-19 parameters, the ethics additions to the course, which were significant, still felt insufficient in depth. This was due to the sensitive nature of the topics and the lack of rich, in person, real-time discussion.

However, in a traditional or asynchronous class, it may be a challenge for instructors teaching our GIFT to create the conducive social/physical environment students need to engage with these topics. Instructors should work to manage emotional responses, nonverbal cues, etc. toward enriched (even vulnerable) depths of conversation. For both the diverse ethics examples as well as the social issues related to each client, robust interpersonal discussion should be encouraged among students where communication aspects like tone of voice, reflection on previous commenters etc. can add to the weight of the discussion. Furthermore, there may be additional limitations for this GIFT in a summer course where there may be less time to select groups, a client and a social issue, all of which require larger portions of class time.

Instructors teaching smaller courses may find that it is more challenging to sort students into groups with similar interests based on their survey responses. In larger course sections, we were easily able to assign groups where students had at least some evident shared interest. When there are less students in total, it can be more challenging to identify clear areas of overlap. It is important to take care in this step to ensure that a student does not feel excluded or unenthusiastic as someone without as much direct interest in the project.

Finally, it is important to make sure that students continue to view the project from the perspective of their client, operating in an ethical manner that serves the best interest of the organization. Because students have selected social issues about which they are passionate, some may at first be inclined to focus on solving the challenge itself, rather than what it means to represent a client engaging with the issue. This is both a limitation – in that it requires additional attention from the instructor – and an opportunity for students to engage critically with what it means to operate ethically as a public relations professional.

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