

A Sequential Approach in Crisis Communication: Integrating Case Study, Press Conference Simulation, and Media Training Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents two sequential team projects in a crisis communication course: case study and press conference simulation. Initially, students engage in a comprehensive team case study, conducting in-depth background research and critical analysis of real-world organizational crisis communication. Subsequently, students prepare a simulated press conference, addressing hypothetical scenarios for the same organizations analyzed in their case studies. The scenarios integrate various social issues, such as diversity and inclusion, ethics, environment, and human rights. In preparation, students apply media training guidelines to enhance their verbal and nonverbal communication skills as crisis spokespersons. This pedagogical approach fosters the development of essential knowledge, skills, and abilities in students, as outlined in the Commission on Public Relations Education's 2018 Fast Forward report. These competencies include knowledge in crisis management and social issues, writing and public speaking skills, and the cultivation of problem-solving, creative, and critical thinking abilities.

Keywords: sequential assignments, media training, spokesperson, crisis communication, simulation, press conference, verbal and nonverbal communication

GIFT Overview

Rationale

This crisis communication course integrates two sequential team assignments – a case study and a simulated press conference. Effective execution of a crisis press conference simulation requires a comprehensive understanding of the organization and crisis communication, writing and communication skills, and problem-solving ability. Researchers in higher education argue that a scaffolding pedagogical approach, including sequential assignments, facilitates student achievement in key learning outcomes such as writing skill, problem-solving, and engagement (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2022; Hunker et al., 2014). This scaffolding approach provides students with the necessary support and guidance to motivate their engagement in active learning (Acosta-Gonzaga & Ramirez-Arellano, 2022).

Case studies are often used in public relations education and practice because the method offers rich data about events, organizations, people, processes, and various circumstances (Stacks, 2016). In the case study component of this course, teams select and analyze recent, real-world organizational crises to evaluate the effectiveness of crisis communication. Each team delivers a comprehensive analysis and presentation, and both are graded by the instructor. Upon completion, students gain in-depth knowledge about the organization and its crisis communication practice. Additionally, students receive feedback on their writing and communication skills and critical thinking abilities from the instructor and peers. Reflecting on feedback from both the instructor and peers (see Appendix A) helps students improve their skills for the subsequent team assignment: the simulation. Thus, the strategic design of the case study and press conference simulation as sequential assignments provides an optimal opportunity for students to develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs).

Public relations educators suggest that classroom simulations are effective pedagogical approaches in crisis communication education (O'Donnell, 2020; Veil, 2010; Wang, 2017). Role-playing activity in a simulated crisis conference enhances students' competencies in crisis management (Wang, 2017). Crisis simulation and collaboration with journalism students have proven to effectively enhance learning about real-life crisis communication (Veil, 2010). Additionally, simulated media interview exercises have been found to improve students' competencies in business acumen, media communication skills, and critical thinking (O'Donnell, 2020). Across various disciplines, simulated activities facilitate students' development of skills and abilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration (Chernikova et al., 2020). These studies recommend implementing a simulation in the crisis classroom as well as in other public relations courses (O'Donnell, 2020; Veil, 2010; Wang, 2017). However, guidelines from a media training perspective are rarely discussed when simulations are implemented in classrooms.

Media training is often considered essential for senior public relations professionals and executives because top executives frequently become spokespersons in crisis communication (Wang & Wang, 2014). Strong verbal and nonverbal communication skills have always been vital for public relations professionals, particularly in today's social media landscape and its visually driven nature. Public relations professionals have noted the importance of visuals in social media communication (Conner, 2018). Consequently, current assignments draw from research to encourage students to develop their verbal and nonverbal communication skills as spokespersons in crises (e.g., De Waele et al., 2018, 2020).

De Waele et al. (2018, 2020) recommended several visual cues for spokespersons' media training, particularly in crises. These cues include maintaining a stable, open, and relaxed posture, showing one's face

directly to the audience (e.g., interviewer or camera), and using a simple background to avoid visual distractions. The researchers also highlighted the importance of verbal and vocal cues, noting that a lower voice pitch can enhance the speaker's credibility. For clearer message delivery, the study suggested using only two or three key messages, having short quotes, and employing information vivid language, such as metaphors or examples. To focus on honesty and empathy, they recommended phrases like "we do, we know, we care" and simplifying key messages (De Waele et al., 2020, p. 6). An organizational crisis is a "perceptual" event (Coombs, 2015) where stakeholders interpret the message from the content itself and the manner of its delivery. Thus, it is essential for aspiring public relations professionals to be ready for managing media interactions and navigating highly "visible" social media communication during crises.

Connection to CPRE's Fast Forward Report

The Commission on Public Relations Education's 2018 Fast Forward report stated that specific knowledge, skills, abilities, and traits are needed for entry-level public relations professionals, bridging the educational-industry gap (O'Neil et al., 2018). Sequential assignments in this course are designed to cultivate these competencies for students. First, students acquire in-depth knowledge about crisis management and various social issues. During the simulated press conference, they deal with hypothetical crisis scenarios involving the same real-world organizations they analyzed in their first project. These hypothetical crisis scenarios concern social issues such as diversity and inclusion, ethics, environment, and human rights. For instance, a hypothetical crisis scenario involves a coffee chain company accused of unethical sourcing and worker exploitation in developing countries. The allegation accuses the company's suppliers of using forced labor under inhumane conditions to produce coffee across multiple developing countries.

Students have multiple opportunities to hone their writing, public speaking, and nonverbal communication skills while completing the assignments including five major deliverables: a case study paper and presentation, a response statement, social media strategy with message examples, and simulated press conference. The case study paper requires extensive secondary research on the organization and its crisis communication strategies. Students apply theoretical frameworks such as Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit's Image Restoration Theory for critical analysis. They also develop persuasive key messages for crisis response statements and social media. During the simulation, students present these messages and engage in Q&A sessions with "media representatives." Preparation for the simulation includes practicing media interviews, video recording themselves and reflections, and applying media training guidelines to potential interview questions (see the Press Conference Simulation Assignment Guide). This method of self-recording and reflection is an effective tool for enhancing oral communication skills (Tailab & Marsh, 2019).

Through sequential projects, students enhance their problem-solving, creative, and critical thinking abilities by analyzing past crises to effectively devise future organizational communication strategies. Students also create authentic and realistic social media content for the hypothetical crises and participate in a peer feedback loop, which involves both offering and receiving critiques on their written, verbal, and nonverbal communication skills. The reflective and collaborative approach in the preparation process fosters the development of problem-solving, creative, and critical thinking abilities. Furthermore, students are required to strategically assign roles and responsibilities for conducting Q/A sessions with the classmates acting as media representatives.

Assignment Learning Objectives

- Gain knowledge of the principles and theories in organizational crisis communication
- Understand various social issues and stakeholders' expectations
- Evaluate the effectiveness of crisis communication execution
- Enhance critical and creative thinking, problem solving abilities
- Apply theoretical knowledge into practice
- Improve proficiency in written, verbal, and nonverbal communication

Connection to Public Relations Practice and/or Theory

Edelman's 2022 *Connected Crisis* study revealed important insights that crisis management is increasingly required for communication and corporate leaders. The report highlights a shift in stakeholder expectations, particularly among Gen Z, who demand transparent communication and wield significant influence over crisis communication through social and digital platforms (Edelman, 2022). Given the rising prominence of social issues in corporate operation and communication, it is critical for future PR professionals to understand a broad spectrum of social issues and their relevance to communication practices. In this course, students delve into Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Theory. Students apply these theories, along with other principles, in practice by writing critical analyses, formulating response strategies, and suggesting recommendations, thereby deepening their understanding of the connection between research and practice.

How the Assignment was Class-Tested

This course, a required 3000-level offering, is designed for PR majors and minors, mostly upper-class students. A prerequisite introductory PR course is essential, ensuring students possess a foundational understanding of public relations principles. Upon

completing the first assignment – a team case study paper and presentation – students are equipped with confidence in comprehending the organization and its crisis communication practices. This foundational knowledge is crucial as they progress to the simulated press conference, which employs hypothetical scenarios for practical application. Ideally, conducting the simulation in a media broadcasting studio or an auditorium-style classroom is recommended, as it provides a more realistic experience to students.

Evidence of Learning Outcomes

Through this course, students acquire a comprehensive understanding about crisis management including its process, various models and strategies, communication planning, engagement with various stakeholders, and critical evaluation of an organization's crisis communication. The assessment of student progress in writing and public speaking skills is facilitated through both formal and informal methods, utilizing multiple deliverables. A senior colleague observed the class and commented:

[I]t is excellent for students' portfolios, and it underscores that research and theory guide message design. She is also having students facilitate press conferences in our media studio, giving students applied experience where from an instructional design perspective, it's clear that assignments for the course build on one another. And, in addition to the professor, students provide feedback to one another.

Template Assignment Guides

Case Study Assignment Guide

Overview

This six-week team project involves a comprehensive case analysis that covers organizational crisis history, background, culture, stakeholders, and critical analysis of crisis responses. Students gain a

deep understanding of both the organization and its crisis communication strategies. In addition, students apply theoretical concepts to real-world cases. The final deliverables include a team paper and presentation.

Instruction

Each team submits a comprehensive case study paper and presentation. The paper should encompass a crisis communication study including analyses of the organization, theoretical framework and review of previous literature (professional and scholarly), crisis timeline and responses, and conclusion. The process for completing this assignment is divided into three steps: 1) submit three potential recent cases for the professor's review, 2) upon receiving approval from the professor, teams start working on the case analysis and periodically sharing their progress for the professor's feedback, and 3) submit the final paper, presentation, and peer and self-evaluation. The case study includes:

- Title page
- Executive summary
 - This one-page summary is tailored for busy professionals, summarizing key findings, evaluation, and/or implications for their future communication practice. Highlight how these insights are beneficial to the organization, the specific situation, and related issues.
- Synopsis
 - Provide a concise overview of the event, its consequences, and its significance to the organization and its stakeholders.
- Organization Background and Industry Overview
 - Summarize the organization's history, mission, vision, and values. Include communication campaigns as well as the industry overview.
- Crisis Situation and Timeline
 - Comprehensive details of the crisis, its impact, and timeline of the crisis.

- Address its significance, financial and reputational impacts, stakeholder reactions, and media responses.
- Theory, Principles, and Concepts
 - Introduce and summarize specific theory or concepts applied in the case study. For example, discuss Coombs' SCCT (2007) or Benoit's IRT (1997) in the section, how either theory (or other principles) makes sense of the case.
- Crisis Communication, Action, and Analysis
 - Analyze the organization's crisis actions and response by tactic or media type or chronicle order or stakeholders.
 - Explain how the organization communicated about the crisis to stakeholders.
 - Identify the crisis response strategies based on the concepts, theories, models, and critical analysis of organization's response and its appropriateness.
- Conclusion
 - Discuss implications, contributions, recommendations, and future directions for the organization and societal impacts.
- References (excluded in the page limit)
 - Include a minimum of 10 credible scholarly and professional references relevant to the topic. An appropriate scholarly study should be 1) published in a communication journal or relevant fields, and 2) an original study with primary data collection (not a review of a book). Professional reference refers to mass media (e.g., New York Times, Wall Street Journal) or reliable professional publications (e.g., PR Week, PR News, PRSA's Strategies and Tactics, Marketing Dive, McKinsey Quarterly, Harvard Business Review).
- Presentation
 - About 15-20 minutes including Q/A session with all team

- members presenting.
- Submit visual aids (PPT, Prezi, video, etc.) on Blackboard. Consider readability and attractiveness of the slide design (e.g., font size, color, relevant visuals/videos, logos, simple layout). Maintain professionalism in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., show confidence, appropriate voice tone).
- Peer and Self-Evaluation
 - Using the provided evaluation forms to assess the performance of each team after presentations. Also, submit a self-evaluation form to reflect on your own performance in this project.
 - Evaluation criteria: Focus on verbal and nonverbal communication skills, the ability to answer questions effectively, and response appropriateness.

Press Conference Simulation Assignment Guide

Overview

Each team hosts a simulated crisis press conference based on a given hypothetical scenario, focusing on the same organization analyzed in the case study. Team members play the role of spokespersons, responsible for representing the organization, delivering the crisis response, and facilitating the Q/A sessions. This four-week project culminates in a set of deliverables: a response statement, social media strategy and message examples, and a simulated press conference presentation.

Instruction

The objective is to enable students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios and equip students with the skills necessary to perform as effective crisis spokespersons, thereby enhancing their proficiency in crisis communication. The hypothetical crises involve one or multiple social issues in the context of diversity and inclusion, ethics,

environment, or human rights.

Five-step process for a successful press conference:

1. Team will receive a unique crisis for its organization.
 - Each team receives a hypothetical crisis scenario.
 - Collaborate with team members to determine the details of the crisis, preparing to address all potential media questions during the press conference.
 - Learn about other teams' crisis scenarios and prepare a minimum seven questions per scenario, ranging from easy (e.g., fact-checking type) to challenging questions (e.g., organizational deception or mismanagement). You will ask those questions to other teams by playing a role of "media" during the conference.
2. Team will submit a paper containing three components: a response statement, social media strategy, and social media message examples.
 - Response statement (one-page): Write a statement outlining key facts and updates about the crisis (e.g., current situation, impact of the crisis, organizational actions, and next steps) and related social issue. This is a statement that the spokesperson will communicate with "media" at the beginning of the conference.
 - Social media strategy
 - Select one or two social media platforms, justifying their relevance to your stakeholders. Explain your stakeholders and their significance to the organization and the crisis.

- Develop a message strategy for the selected social media platforms, providing a rationale for its appropriateness.
 - Outline a timeline and frequency for your social media posts.
 - Social media message examples
 - Write realistic social media messages aligned with your suggested strategy, considering elements like hashtags, account names, visuals, etc.
3. Spokesperson training (all members)
- Summarize the key do's and don'ts for spokesperson training based on course materials (Coombs, Ch. 4 [2015]; De Waele et al. [2018, 2020]).
 - Record a video of yourself presenting the statement without looking at the notes or statement.
 - Video recording: Each student should create a 1-2 minute video, using their cellphone, demonstrating a stand-up position.
 - Review and reflect: Utilize the established do's and don'ts to review your own and team members' videos and share constructive feedback. Please reflect on each other's comments and practice your presentation.
 - In-class workshop: Share a one-paragraph summary in class, discussing improvement in verbal and nonverbal communication skills gained from the media training process.
4. Press conference day: The simulation will be about 12-15 minutes per team and all team members must speak during the conference.
- Presenting role: Host the crisis press conference, utilizing a one-page response statement for key information. No

PowerPoint slides or visual aids are permitted.

- Non-presenting role: Act as a “journalist,” attending and engaging in all other teams’ conferences by asking questions.
5. Peer and self-evaluation: Using the provided evaluation forms to assess the performance of each team after presentations. Also, submit a self-evaluation form to reflect on your own performance in this project.
- Evaluation criteria: Focus on verbal and nonverbal communication skills, the ability to answer questions effectively, and response appropriateness.

Assignment Grading Criteria or Rubric

The Commission on Public Relations Education’s Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities are intended to be measured in both team assignments – case study and press conference simulation as following:

- Knowledge in crisis management and social issue
- Skills in writing, public speaking, and communication
- Abilities in problem-solving, critical, and creative thinking

Crisis Case Study Paper (Total 100 points)

Executive Summary & Synopsis (10)

Concisely summarizes key findings and valuable recommendations. Skillfully narrates the crisis, its significance, and consequences. Professionally organized.

Organization Background and Industry Overview (10)

Extensive background research on the organization, including mission, vision, values, etc. Summarizes key facts from an industry overview and the industry’s characteristics.

Crisis Situation and Timeline (20)

Detailed description of the crisis and its impact. Explains the significance of the crisis and related social issues. Describes media and stakeholder reactions. Utilizes credible sources (news, published reports)

and presents a clear timeline.

Theory and Principles (10)

Concise and accurate description of the relevant theory or principles. Justifies their application.

Crisis Communication, Action, and Analysis (25)

Comprehensively addresses the crisis responses and actions. Justifies the analysis based on application of chosen theory or principles. Provides a critical analysis of crisis management. Demonstrates deep understanding of the crisis and its magnitude.

Conclusion (15)

Synthesizes case highlights. Discusses limitations, implications for future practice, and societal impact. Provides insightful recommendations.

Reference and Style (10)

Adheres to APA citation style. Included a minimum of 10 credible sources.

Crisis Case Study Presentation (Total 100 points)

Case Study Presentation Materials (50)

Includes all required elements. Engages audience with appropriate visuals. All texts are clear and easily readable.

Case Study Presentation (50)

Demonstrates confidence and good understanding of the case and crisis management. Efficient time management. Presenters are well-prepared, using appropriate voice tone, body language (e.g., eye-contact), and maintaining professionalism.

Press Conference Simulation Paper (Total 100 points)

Response Statement (50)

Addresses crisis responses and actions. Clearly informs the updates on the crisis and outlines next steps. Demonstrates in-depth understanding of the crisis and its societal impact.

Social Media Strategy and Message Examples (50)

Strategic approach to the chosen social media platform(s), considering the stakeholder and the crisis. Clearly states the strategy and message timeline. Ensures message examples are aligned with the proposed strategy. Messages are realistic and professional.

Press Conference Simulation Performance (Total 100 points)

Demonstrates confidence and good understanding of the case and crisis management. Efficiently manages time and addresses all inquiries during the Q&A sessions. Presenters are well-prepared, using appropriate voice tone, body language (e.g., eye-contact), and maintaining professionalism.

Teaching Note

These sequential projects are best suited for crisis communication or media relations courses, ideally with class sizes ranging from 15 to 25 students who have previously completed an introductory public relations course. Implementing these assignments may be challenging in classes where students lack foundational knowledge in public relations. Instructors should encourage and support students to proactively initiate the projects, as active participation is vital for the success of these projects. Providing weekly informal feedback to each team can enhance student engagement. However, managing this format in larger classes could present logistical challenges. After students receive their grades on the case study assignment, conducting a class-wide discussion is recommended. This discussion should aim to identify strategies for strengthening writing, public speaking, and communication skills for the subsequent project, the simulation. For the simulation, it is imperative that students should familiarize themselves with the other teams' cases in addition to preparing their own crisis case. Facilitating multiple group discussions can be an effective way for encouraging peer-to-peer learning

and idea exchange. Conducting the press conference simulation in a special setting, such as a media broadcasting studio or an auditorium-style classroom would be advantageous as such environments more closely replicate the dynamics of a real press conference, providing students with a more authentic learning experience. Instructors are encouraged to review award-winning case studies from reputable sources like the Arthur W. Page Society's student case study competition, the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Silver Anvil, and Public Relations Student Society of America's (PRSSA) Bateman case study competition. For additional research and insights, valuable open-access resources worth exploring include the Institute for Public Relations' (IPR) research library and the International Public Relations Research Conference's (IPRRC) proceedings.

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Appendix A

Student Peer and Self Review Criteria Example

Overall Evaluation (1-5 Likert Scale):

- How effectively was the press conference organized?
- To what extent did the conference inform attendees about the organization's actions?
- How well-prepared were the spokespersons for the conference?
- How effectively did the team collaborate?
- How professionally were all questions answered by the spokespersons?

Qualitative Comments:

- What were the highlights of the conference?
- What constructive feedback can be offered to the team?

Verbal Communication (1-5 Likert Scale) (De Waele et al., 2020):

- How effectively were two or three key messages presented?
- Were there relevant short quotes to emphasize the key messages?
- How vividly did they (or you) deliver information through metaphors or examples?
- How well did they (or you) explain the key message in a simple way?

Nonverbal Communication (1-5 Likert Scale) (De Waele et al., 2020):

- How well did they (or you) maintain a stable, open, and relaxed posture?
- Was the face clearly visible to the audience (e.g., interviewer or camera)?