

Teaching Brief/GIFT

Creativity in the PR Classroom: Answering CPRE's Call to Strengthen Students' Critical Strategic Thinking Skills

Amy McCoy, Drake University
Kelly Bruhn, Drake University

ABSTRACT

The 2023 report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) identified key areas of focus for PR educators to enhance students' learning and preparation for successful public relations careers. Their research found both educators and PR practitioners desired strong problem solving, creative thinking, analytic thinking and strategic planning abilities, but scores were lower when asked if students delivered those in the workplace. This in-class exercise, administered in two upper-level courses, included a pre-test to assess students' confidence in creativity and collaboration, small-group work to develop measurable objectives and creative activations for a select "Audience" and "Action" (see worksheet in Appendix C). The session ended with a post-test to reassess the same factors listed above, as well as a whole-class discussion about creativity and critical strategic thinking in public relations (see Appendix A for a step-by-step guide and discussion prompts). This exercise reinforced the CPRE recommendations noted above, as well as their call to "Encourage curiosity" and "...Teach students to align...with measurable organizational outcomes and public relations objectives rather than low-level outputs."

Keywords: creativity, PR, curiosity, CPRE

Overview of the Assignment, Including the Rationale

The 2023 report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) identified key areas of focus for PR educators to enhance students' learning and preparation for successful public relations careers. CPRE leaders called for "experiential learning opportunities... that will enhance...exposure to professional behavior and workplace expectations, as well as helping develop the students' soft skills" and "course content with a strong focus on students communicating on a personal level with key audiences..." (p. 22). They noted, "...employers will expect entry-level graduates who can demonstrate a level of proficiency in the following areas to make a contribution..." and listed creativity, flexibility and adaptability, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, and analytical skills among those core competencies (p. 28). Their research found that both educators and PR practitioners desired strong problem-solving, creative thinking, analytical thinking, and strategic planning abilities, but scores were lower when respondents were asked whether students demonstrated these in the workplace (p. 41). They recommended "educators need to ensure their classes connect graduates to the relationships between problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and strategic planning" (p. 37).

This in-class exercise, administered in two upper-level courses, included a pre-test to assess students' confidence in creativity and collaboration, small-group work to develop measurable objectives and creative activations for a select "Audience" and "Action" (see worksheet in Appendix C). The session ended with a post-test to reassess the same factors listed above, as well as a whole-class discussion about creativity and critical strategic thinking in public relations (see Appendix A for a step-by-step guide and discussion prompts). This exercise reinforced the CPRE recommendations noted above, as well as their call to "Encourage curiosity" and "...Teach students to align...with measurable organizational lower confidence.

References

- Commission on Public Relations Education. (2023). *Navigating change: Recommendations for advancing undergraduate PR education: CPRE 50th Anniversary Report*. <https://www.commissionpred.org/navigating-change-recommendations-for-advancing-undergraduate-pr-education-cpre-50th-anniversary-report/>
- Jennings, R. (2025, January 30). *The salty, briny, lemony, garlicky rise of “pick me” foods: How pickles and olives became the avocado for Gen Z*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/culture/397306/food-trends-pickles-olives-tinned-fish>

Appendix A

Overview of the In-Class Exercise

- Ask Students to Read [This Vox Article](#) (Jennings, 2025) Prior to Arriving in Class.
- Administer and Collect Pre-Tests (see Appendix B).
- Divide Students into Small Groups and Distribute Worksheets.
- Invite Students to Pick a Card at Random for Audience and Action.
- Display a Sample Measurable Objective, Reminding Students of Key Elements (Audience, Action, Amount, and Time).
- Provide Time for Student Groups to Develop a Measurable Objective Using Their Audience and Action Cards. Students Identify a Potential Partnership To Achieve Their Objective and Pitch Their Idea to the Class.
- Encourage Student Groups to Develop an Experiential Campaign Idea, a User-Generated Social Media Campaign Idea and a Traditional Media Relations Pitch. All Ideas Must Align With Their Objective. Task Them With Paying Particular Attention to Measurement.
- <Optional: If The Class Has A Client/Community Partner, Complete the Tasks Above On Their Behalf, Incorporating The Client's Key Message(s).>
- Administer and Collect Post-Tests (see Appendix B).
- Whole-Class Discussion About Creativity and Critical Strategic Thinking in Public Relations.
 - Review Recent PRSA Silver Anvil Award-Winners Focused on Creativity. ("7-Eleven Brings Slurpee to a New Generation" is an excellent example. 7-Eleven with Edible, Inc, Dentsu and Intersport won a 2024 Award of Excellence in the Integrated Communications – Consumer Products category.)

- Probe for:
 - Challenges and opportunities when working with colleagues.
 - Approach to developing creative ideas.
 - Mastering the development of measurable objectives.
 - Adaptability and flexibility, especially when inheriting “stiff” or “corporate” messaging from clients/community partners.
 - Thoughts on the importance of critical strategic thinking and analytical skill development in Public Relations.

Appendix B**Pre- and Post-Test****Name:** _____**Major(s):** _____**I am a creative person.**

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I feel confident in my ability to develop creative ideas on my own.

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I feel confident in my ability to develop creative ideas with peers.

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I consider myself an innovator.

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I enjoy collaborating with peers.

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

I am good at adapting ideas (like current trends or news events) to support my public relations work.

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Creativity is an important skill public relations professionals need for success.

Completely								Completely	
Agree								Disagree	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix C

Worksheet After Students Draw Audience + Action Cards

Potential Audience Cards: Young Children, Suburbanites, Rural Americans, Single Women, City Dwellers, College Students, Gen Alpha, Single Men, Boomers, Millennials

Potential Action Cards: Playing Sports, Reading, Volunteering, Sleep, Lawn Care/Gardening, Learn a Language, Cooking, Gaming, Yoga/Working Out, Crocheting/Knitting

Name: _____

First, let's practice...

Audience _____

Action _____

Objective _____

Now, your pitch + potential partnership

Let's get strategic...

Strategic Approach: How will you achieve this objective?

What's the core insight about your audience that makes this approach compelling?

What strategic positioning will differentiate this from competitors?

What behavior change or perception shift are you targeting?

Now, let's apply this further for our client...

Objective: What do you want to achieve?

Audience _____

Action _____

Objective _____

Remember, all work must incorporate the client's key message.

Strategy: Your overall approach to achieving this objective.

Next, let's dig into tactics...

Strategic Tactic #1: An Experiential Campaign Idea (An immersive experience or event where the audience can interact with or evaluate the brand)

Rationale: Why is an experiential approach strategically sound for this objective?

Pitch: _____

Objective: _____

Strategic Link: How does this tactic directly connect to your objective?

Strategic Tactic #2: A User-Generated Social Media Campaign Idea

Rationale: Why is a UGC/social media approach strategically sound for this objective?

Pitch: _____

Objective: _____

Strategic Link: How does this tactic directly ladder up (connect) to your objective?

Strategic Tactic #3: A Traditional Media Relations Pitch (Publication, Audience, Idea/Concept)

Rationale: Why is a media relations approach strategically sound for this objective?

Pitch: _____

Objective: _____

Strategic Link: How does this tactic directly connect to your objective?

Final Reflection: How do these tactics work together (synergy)?
