

Three-Week Outline

2016

Ethics Module for Foundational Course in Public Relations



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1 MODULE OVERVIEW

This module is designed to provide an overview of ethical theories and principles that are useful for the development of a framework for ethical decision-making in the professional practice of public relations & corporate communications across sectors. The module requires significant student reading outside of class and knowledge and attitudes are measured through the student completion of a single assignment. The value of this assignment should be included as part of the overall evaluation scheme for the course in which this module is embedded.

2 MODULE OBJECTIVES

By the end of the ethics module, the students should be able to:

- 1) Identify the basic principles upon which ethical public communication practice is based.
- 2) Identify and discuss important current issues resulting in ethical dilemmas in practice.
- 3) Demonstrate thoughtful reflection on ethics issues inherent in everyday practice.
- 4) Reflect on a personal code of ethics.

3 REQUIRED STUDENT READING

Parsons, Patricia J. (2016). *Ethics in public relations: A guide to best practice*. 3rd ed. London: Kogan Page.

4 READING FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

Bivins, Thomas. (2004). *Mixed media: Moral distinctions in advertising, public relations and journalism*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Fitzpatrick, Kathy. & Bronstein, Carolyn. Eds. (2006). *Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Frankfurt, Harry. (2005). *On bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Irwin, William (ed.). (2000). *Seinfeld and philosophy: A book about everything and nothing*. Chicago: Open Court.
- Nash, Laura. (1995). *Good intentions aside: A manager's guide to resolving ethical problems*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Nelson, Joyce. (1989). *The Sultans of sleaze: Public relations and the media*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press.
- O'Hara, Kieron. (2004). *Trust: From Socrates to spin*. Cambridge (UK): Icon Books Ltd.
- Rampton, Sheldon and John Stauber. (2001). *Trust us, we're experts! How industry manipulates science and gambles with your future*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam.

5 ASSIGNMENT DESCRIPTION

5.1 PERSONAL CODE OF ETHICS

The purpose of this assignment is to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their own moral development prior to developing a sense of professional ethics. The assignment requires the students to think about ethics as it applies to them both personally and professionally. They are required to put this thinking into words creating a personal code of ethics that reflects what they believe to be important (their values) and how these can find manifestation in action. The code assignment consists of the following elements:

- **A personal code** of conduct that emanates from their personal values. (Bullets are generally used for delineating the *individual tenets* of codes of ethics).
- **A professional code** that elucidates their values related to the requirements of your chosen discipline (bulleted again).
- **A brief explanatory paper** indicating the thought process in which the student engaged to develop these codes. This narrative essay should explain how the student came to develop these particular values as an individual and how the student thinks about them now. (How did the student get to be the person he/she is today?)

The narrative essay should be between 900-1100 words. Each of the bulleted codes should be between one and two pages.

The marks will not be based on whether or not the professor/instructor believes the student to be ethical. The quality of the thought process and congruency between codes and the described value system are keys. The marking rubric is attached.

6 THREE-WEEK ETHICS MODULE

Week #	Topics	Case for Discussion	Required Reading
1	Foundations of PR Ethics: * Introduction to ethics and moral reasoning * What ethics is & is not * Personal versus professional ethics * The 'Pillars of Public Relations Ethics'	"My Personal Life versus My Professional Life"	Chapters 1-6
2	Professional Ethics * Moral development * What it means to be a professional * Professional codes of ethics * Conflict of interest * Ethical decision-making	"Ghostwriting"	Chapters 7-10, 16
3	Ethics in everyday PR: * Traditional and new media relations * Persuasion & propaganda * Cause-related marketing & sponsorship * Ghostwriting * The organizational ethics program	"Any Client, Any Time?"	Chapters 11-15, 17-18.

7 CASES FOR DISCUSSION

7.1 CASE #1 : « MY PERSONAL LIFE VERSUS MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE »

You received your PR/communication degree two months ago, began your new job as a junior account consultant at KK & J Strategic Communications three weeks later and are now working busily on three client portfolios. You report to senior account executive Kim. Every Friday afternoon all members of your team (you, Kim, the creative director, copy writer and another account consultant who graduated from the same program as you did a year earlier) go to a local bar for a drink to celebrate the week's activities. Last Friday, it became clear to you that

Kim is interested in more than your brilliant strategic mind. After everyone else had left, you found yourself alone with Kim at the table, your second martini almost finished. As you take the final sip from your martini, Kim leans over toward you and asks you to have dinner a week from Saturday. You've often thought about what it might be like to get to know Kim outside the office. Kim is a great boss and you like your job. You are flattered and interested.

The following Sunday, you meet a friend for brunch. Your friend is a classmate from MSVU and now works as a media relations adviser at the QE II Health Sciences Centre. You relate the story of Friday night.

As you fill in the details, your friend looks appalled. "Of course, you turned the invitation down?"

"Well, I haven't really decided yet. I think Kim and I would be great together – if you know what I mean."

"Are you crazy? Personally, I think you're crazy to date even a co-worker. And you certainly shouldn't sleep with someone you work with! But your boss! What are you thinking? It can only end badly and you know it."

Position 1: My personal relationships are my own business. I can date whomever I like and if I want to sleep with my boss or anyone else at work, I'm going to. I'm going to go out on that date and see where it leads. Kim might be my soul-mate.

Position 2: Dating a colleague or a superior would result in a personal conflict of interest. I don't have the right to put my colleagues or my employer in such a position; they are bound to find out sooner or later and it could affect my work – or appear to. And I'm unwise to put myself in that position. I'm going to turn down the invitation.

7.2 CASE #2: "GHOSTWRITING"

You have been hired on a freelance contract to produce written materials for Oceanside Designs, a fashion design studio that is owned by Allyson McPherson. Allyson is well known on local television in Halifax and around the province, and is quickly becoming well-known across the country. However, not quickly enough for Allyson's liking.

You are happy to begin work for her by writing copy for her web site that promotes Allyson's designs and increasingly promotes Allyson. When she asks about 'tweeting' you explain it to her and she asks you to go ahead and ensure that she is 'tweeting' every day! "I want everyone to think that I've written everything," she says to you. "This business is me – I am this business, after all!" You are cautioned that you can tell no one about the fact that you are working for her at all. Indeed, she cautions you against putting this work on your résumé.

Allyson is very happy with your work and tells you that it always sounds as if she had written it herself. Eventually, she tells you that she has been asked to write several articles for industry publications and asks you to do it for her. You do all the research and the articles are accepted for publication. Everyone thinks that she is a terrific writer and so knowledgeable about fashion design, although you know that if she didn't have her staff to design and you to research and write, she would not have a name as a designer. In fact, two of the articles you have ghosted

for her are nominated for Fashion Journalism Awards. When the award presenter describes her as “a woman of many talents; it’s not often that designers are also such talented writers...” she beams with humility and accepts the award.

On Monday back at Allyson’s office, you happen to be chatting with one of her junior designers who asks, “Doesn’t it feel weird to see her accept an award for a talent that is yours and not hers?”

Unfortunately, Allyson overhears this comment and promptly fires you and your friend saying, “Remember that client confidentiality thing!”

Position 1: Ghostwriting is part of the required work for public relations writers and there is nothing unethical about it. In fact, you have an ethical obligation to maintain your client confidentiality. You just have to suck it up.

Position 2: You consider that there are serious moral considerations to ghostwriting in general and in this work situation in particular. You think that perhaps people ought to know that you have been doing all the work. You are entitled to the kudos.

7.3 CASE #3: “ANY CLIENT, ANY TIME”

You have been looking for a job for three months. The only ones that seem to be available are for website editors and the pay is very low. Your significant other is a medical student and your part-time job at Tim Horton’s is not really covering expenses any longer – and besides you’d like to begin paying down your \$20,000 student loan debt. Maybe going to Cancun last study break hadn’t been such a good idea after all!

Just when you think you might have to take one of those crappy website jobs, a friend of yours who works for a career placement company calls to tell you that he has recommended you for a terrific job that would allow you to use your wide-ranging public relations skills.

“I sent them your résumé and they were very impressed. In fact, they said that if you’re a good fit for their corporate culture, the job will be yours. It’s with Worldstar Global in the public affairs office. They have a two-year contract for a specific project.”

The company name sounds familiar. Your friend continues: “And get this – they are offering a package that includes a starting salary of \$62,000 a year, three weeks paid vacation and a medical-dental insurance package.”

Then it hits you. Last year while you were on an eco-volunteering trip to Ecuador, your room-mate who was born in Ecuador told you about the company that was ruining the cloud forests in Ecuador with their refineries and their plants that burn old rubber tires. It was Worldstar Global!

“Don’t worry about your environmental conscience,” says your friend, “I told them you were a crusader and they said it would be fine as long as you kept your opinion to yourself. In fact, they thought it would be a real bonus to have a young environmentalist on their staff. The project is to convince the Costa Rican populace that a new refinery in the rain forest is good for the economy.

Position 1: I’m going to go to the interview, impress them with my knowledge of their business and take the job if they offer it to me. I know that what they’re doing is wrong. So what? I don’t have to like what they do: I like the salary they’re offering.

Position 2: I cannot in good conscience work for an organization whose work is contributing in such a big way to the degradation of the environment. I'd be lying every time I took their side on an issue. As attractive as the benefit package is, I'm going to have to turn down the opportunity.

8 “PERSONAL CODE OF ETHICS” MARKING RUBRIC

	A	B	C	D	F
Assignment Requirements (2)	Submission contains all elements described in the assignment. Outline utilized. 2	Required elements present, but some overlap, lack of clarity or disorganization. 1.5	Submission is missing one of the elements in the assignment. 1	More than one required element missing. .5	Submission shows no evidence of following the guidelines. 0
Thoughtfulness of code elements (5)	Evidence of thoughtful consideration of a variety of personal values; codes are congruent & specific to personal or professional issues. 5	Two codes included; they are generally congruent but not specific. 4	Shows little thoughtfulness & too few values were considered. Codes not specific to personal or professional and/or not congruent. 3	Some consideration of values evident, but application seriously flawed. 1-2	Submission shows no evidence of any values being considered. 0
Thoughtfulness and clarity of explanatory narrative (5)	Submission is well-written & personally reflective, indicating a significant amount of thought that is clearly congruent with the accompanying codes. 5	Submission is thoughtful & clearly written, if not compelling. Some reflection evident; generally congruent with the code. 4	Some personal thought given to the submission but the presentation is sometimes unclear. 3	Little evidence of personal reflection on the values and how they were developed. Narrative is sterile or missing reflection on values represented by the codes. 1-2	Submission is lacking in original insight; shows little evidence of thinking this through or taking the assignment seriously. 0
Completeness of narrative (5)	Reflective of all tenets of the codes presented. All are clearly explained from personal examples. 5	Generally reflective of the elements of the codes; a few are less well considered. A few personal examples. 3	Incompleteness leading to incongruity between the elements of the codes and the thought processes described. 2	Parts of the narrative are incoherent resulting in little relationship between narrative & code elements. 1	No relationship between the explanatory narrative and the codes presented. 0
Style	Submission is	Submission is well		Submission is	Submission indicates

Considerations (5)	flawless. No style errors evident. 5	done with a few copy editing errors. 3		acceptable but contains some copyediting & basic style errors. 1-2	a lack of attention to style issues & editing; very poorly written. 0
Presentation (3)	The presentation of the material is extremely professional and well organized. 3	Presentation is acceptable, with some errors. 2	Professional presentation needs work; errors throughout. 1	Generally shows lack of consideration of presentation issues. .5	Sloppy; poorly presented; disorganized. 0